

THE CHIEF CONSTABLE
NIGHT FLIGHT TO ZURICH
SUFFICIENT ROPE
ACCIDENTAL MURDER
INSPECTOR HIGGINS GOES FISHING
FROM INFORMATION RECEIVED
THE UGLY CUSTOMER
THE MAN WITH A MONOCLE
MURDER AT MIDNIGHT
EXIT HARLEQUIN
THE OLD MANOR
MELANDER'S MILLIONS
TWO DIED AT THREE
THE RETURN OF HENRY PRINCE
THE VANDOR MYSTERY
JUSTICE!
THE FATAL ERROR
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EXPERT EVIDENCE
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THE WRONG HOUSE
HENRY PRINCE IN ACTION
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THE TEN BLACK PEARLS
THE EXECUTION OF DIAMOND DEUTSCH
INSPECTOR HIGGINS SEES IT THROUGH
THE DUKE'S LAST TRICK
THE BODY BEHIND THE BAR
INSPECTOR HIGGINS HURRIES
THE DOUBLE SOLUTION
THE RUTLAND MYSTERY
THE BRAZEN CONFESSOR
THE MURDER ON THE BUS
THE THREE DAGGERS
THE MURDERED MANSERVANT

DEAD ON TIME

A Tale of Inspector Higgins

by

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Chapter One

FEAR

LANCELOT LANGLEY sat at his desk in his tiny office, a typewriter in front of him, staring moodily at the unresponsive keys, trying to count his many blessings one by one and failing to find any.

To begin with, he was supposed to be an author and had, in fact, been successful in getting several books published; but that was as far as the success went—for the returns were very mediocre. He had yet to hit the headlines. And he had come to the conclusion that he never would.

He had started out so hopefully, too. Light, costume romances. That was why he had chosen the name Lancelot in lieu of his given name of Henry; he liked the alliterative effect. And his first book *The Gallant Cavalier* had actually paid his rent for the time it took to write it. But he had to eat as well—and he soon realized, as most authors have done at some time or other, that it is essential to have other income as well if one wishes to write.

Which in his case meant a job.

He glumly supposed that it *was* some sort of a blessing to have got his current job. Secretary of the Rosemary Residential Club. At least it provided a roof over his head and enough to eat—but it provided little time for literary effort.

What a fatuous name to start with! Rosemary Residential Club. Of course, it *was* in Rosemary Street, slightly off the beaten track of the West End of London, but one would have thought the originators could have thought of a more suitable name. Residential was apt but only just—for there were only five small suites above the club premises proper and these had been tenanted by the same people for donkey's years. And one other very small bedroom which he was privileged to occupy.

It was not an easy job. Too many bosses, for one thing.

Eleven committee men, to start with; each with his own ideas as to how the club should be run and constantly expressing them. And past committee members forgetting they were no longer in office. And prospective committee members anticipating election to office. And complaints from the ordinary members.

The debenture holders, too, with a mortgage on the premises, fondly imagined that this gave a corollary right to criticize, despite the fact that their interest was (and always had been) paid on the due date.

And one and all firm in the belief that a secretary should be on duty day and night—at the beck and call of every member.

Life was hard.

Lancelot Langley glared at the sheet of paper in his machine, on which the day before yesterday he had hopefully typed at the top 'Chapter One'. That was as far as he had got with his new novel. And that seemed as far as he was likely to get. Ideas simply refused to come. He was written out—that was the trouble. And that meant that, as a writer, he was as good as written off.

'Hallo-allo! Loafing agen?'

Langley jerked himself out of his reverie, set his face in a spurious smile and turned. One o' these days he'd hit Oakfield slap in the jaw. The man had no manners. Couldn't even tap on the door of a private room.

'Good afternoon, Mr Oakfield. Anything I can do?'

'There isn't a spot of chalk in the whole blasted billiards room. Are we broke or something?'

'There's a gross box in the cupboard there.'

'You mean there *was*. There isn't now.' Oakfield leaned over the typewriter. 'Hallo-allo. "Chapter One"? What's all this? Writing a book or something?'

'Or something is right,' lugubriously. 'I have written several. There are copies in the library here.'

'Are there? Well, well. I never read. Except *The Racing Herald*, of course. And what's this?' He picked up another piece of paper from the desk. 'Starting with an index or something?'

'Not exactly. It is confusing to readers when more than

one character begins with the same letter. So I check up as I go along. I write the alphabet on a piece of paper and as each character appears I . . .'

'Not a bad idea to start with an index, you know,' commented Oakfield brightly. 'Fill in all the names you can think of—the larger the better—and drag 'em all in somehow. Write an autobiography or something and . . .'

'Fiction is my line.'

'H'm! So are half the autobiographies, I'll bet. Pack the book with names, tack the index on the end—and then everyone mentioned there is sure to buy the book just to see what you've said about 'em and . . . Dammit! It's an idea. I could do it myself.'

'There's a law of libel, you know.'

'Don't be silly. I should only say *nice* things about 'em. I'm not such a fool . . . What did I come here for, anyway?' dropping the sheet on to the desk and frowning at the club secretary.

'Billiards chalk,' said Langley.

'Heck! So I did. And Unwin's waiting for a game o' snooker. Well? What about it?'

Lancelot Langley rose wearily to his feet. 'I suppose I'd better come along and have a look in that cupboard,' he said.

Oakfield snorted. 'Don't be daft, man. Do you think I'm blind or something? Isn't there an odd piece knocking about here somewhere? Old Cocky used to play quite a bit.'

'Cocky?' Langley raised inquiring eyebrows.

'Cockell, your predecessor. Hot stuff. Often gave me a game. Beat me once, too.'

'H'm! He left a lot of oddments in the desk here. Didn't notice any chalk, though. I dumped the lot in a box and stuck it in that cupboard.' Langley nodded across the room. 'We can have a look.'

Oakfield opened the cupboard door. 'Is this it?' he asked as he pulled out a cardboard box. Langley nodded and crossed over. But halted as Oakfield turned to frown speculatively in his direction. 'So you didn't notice any chalk, eh?' he said.

Langley shrugged. 'Help yourself if there is any,' he said equably.

'Haven't looked yet. *That's* as far as I've got,' pointing downwards.

Langley leaned forwards and peered into the box. Lying on top of a heterogeneous collection of bits and pieces was a brand-new revolver. Frowning he picked it from the box.

'One o' the oddments Cocky left behind?' inquired Oakfield. 'Or didn't you notice that, either?' Then hastily backed away. 'Be careful how you handle the damn' thing,' he said. 'It may be loaded or something.'

Langley, a somewhat supercilious expression on his face, shrugged. 'The safety catch is on. No need to get hot and bothered. And it *is* loaded. One chamber discharged.' He sniffed nonchalantly at the barrel. 'Fairly recently, too, be'y guess.'

'You seem to know something about 'em, anyway.'

'M'yes. Introduced one into one of my books. You have to be careful when you write about 'em—else some fool'll write to tell you where you've slipped up. Wonder how it got here.'

'Don't you *know*?'

'I'm afraid not.' Langley sighted an imaginary target, his finger lightly touching the trigger.

'Er—is there any chalk?' asked Oakfield hastily. 'Yes. Here's a piece. I—um—mustn't keep Unwin waiting any longer.' He nodded brightly, smiled weakly and almost backed out of the room, making considerably more noise in leaving than he had upon arrival.

Now what? Lancelot Langley stared at the weapon in his hand wondering precisely what he ought to do, for the revolver was certainly no legacy from his predecessor. It was equally certain that it had not been there when he had placed the box in the cupboard a few days ago. It had been put there since. By whom? Every member of the club seemed to have the idea that this office was more or less part of the general amenities of the place—if he were to judge by the number of times people had barged in on him for some reason or other. Was it possible that Oakfield himself had pulled a fast one and had dumped it there himself just a few moments ago?

Oakfield. No manners, of course. No visible means of

support, either. Great supporter of the bar and the billiards room. Probably used the club as a bookmaker's office. Rather a spiv type. Not a bad idea of his, though, to write a highly-coloured autobiography. With an index. The club register of members would do for that. As a start, anyway. And . . .

But this revolver. Langley wondered what he would have done with it had Oakfield not helped to find it. Probably sneaked it out of the place and chucked it in the Thames. Not a very public-spirited action, maybe, but . . . Dammit! The police would *have* to be notified. And the Committee wouldn't like that one little bit. In any case, Oakfield would talk. Or would he? Langley frowned. Oakfield was the type who simply *must* talk. Probably at this very moment giving Unwin a highly coloured account of what had just happened. Unless, of course, he himself had just planted it—using the billiards chalk as an excuse. H'm! We can soon check up on that.

Langley dropped the revolver on his desk and left his office. He could hear the click of the snooker balls long before he reached the billiards room. Oakfield and Unwin *were* playing. Both looked up as he opened the door. He stood still, out of the line of sight, whilst Unwin made a shot and then crossed to a cupboard. The gross box was there all right—but there was no chalk in it.

'Satisfied?' asked Oakfield nastily, as he breathed over his shoulder.

Langley turned. Shrugged. 'It seems just a little petty to pinch the lot,' he observed. 'I'll order some more. And keep 'em in my office.'

'With the other things, eh?'

Langley wasn't at all sure that he liked the snigger which accompanied the remark.

He returned to his office. The revolver was no longer on his desk.

Langley glanced apprehensively round his office. A mouse with icy feet ran down his spine. The tip of his tongue ran round his lips. For the first time in years, he felt afraid. It was uncanny . . . or was it? *Somebody* must have . . .

He spun round quickly at the sound of movement behind

him—to stare wild-eyed at a benevolent-looking gentleman standing in the doorway. It was Mr Quenlock, the Chairman of the Committee.

‘Bit jumpy, this evening, aren’t we?’ he said—raising his eyebrows.

‘S-sorry, sir. You—you startled me.’

‘Did I? Quite unintentional, I assure you. Just looking into see how you were getting along. Settling down all right?’

‘Er—yessir. More or less. You see, sir—er . . .’ Lancelot Langley trailed off into silence. This was going to be difficult.

‘Well?’ Mr Quenlock eyed the club secretary with a certain amount of misgiving.

‘Well, sir,’ with a rush. ‘Somebody left a loaded revolver in the cupboard. . . .’

‘What?’

‘A loaded revolver, sir. In the cupboard here. And . . .’

‘Where is it? Show it to me.’

‘It’s gone, sir.’

Mr Quenlock carefully closed the outer door, advanced slowly into the room and stared at the secretary. ‘Let’s get this straight. You found a loaded revolver in the cupboard here and—er . . .’

‘Mr Oakfield actually found it, sir.’

‘Oakfield, eh?’ From the tone of the chairman’s voice it would seem that he had no very high regard for the gentleman in question. ‘When?’

‘A few moments ago, sir.’

‘Since when it has vanished?’

‘Er—yessir.’

‘H’m!’ Mr Quenlock scratched the top of his bald head with his little fingernail. ‘I—um—I suppose Oakfield will—um . . .’ He broke off; coughed.

Then the bell of the telephone on Langley’s desk started to ring. Mr Quenlock edged towards the door. ‘You attend to that, Langley. I—um—I’ll have a few words with Oakfield.’

‘He’s in the billiards room, sir.’ The secretary lifted the instrument from its cradle as the outer door closed behind the chairman. ‘Rosemary Residential Club,’ he said. ‘Secretary speaking.’

The line went dead; then started emitting the dialling tone. Langley almost dropped the instrument back to its rest. He stared apprehensively round the empty room.

.

Lancelot Langley hit the headlines the following morning. And, according to the *Daily Sentinel*, achieved belated renown. Its headline read:

FAMOUS AUTHOR FOUND DEAD

But then, perhaps, any author, in similar circumstances, would have been deemed famous.

So far as Detective Inspector Higgins, of New Scotland Yard, was concerned, he had never even heard of him before. It is not

Chapter Two

HUNCH

'L

into INSPECTOR HIGGINS, a one-sided smile on his homely face,

'Er raised one eyebrow and stared quizzically at his underling. Langl' So your first case more or less died on you, son,' he observed.

'Well fore or less, sir,' agreed Sergeant Brownall, a shade certain anxiously.

'We had luck. Still, if it had turned out to be murder, you might not have been left in sole charge, you know. They'd have probably dragged me in.'

'I half wish they had, sir.'

Inspector Higgins grinned widely. 'Thanks for the compliment, sarge, but what's the beef?'

The two officers were seated in the inspector's office—his cubby-hole as he generally termed it. Inspector Higgins is a large man—very large; and the sergeant, though almost as tall, was little more than half the inspector's weight. The pair made a useful team, working together as a general rule, but Brownall alone had conducted the inquiries into the death of Lancelot Langley; and the eventual coroner's court had brought in a verdict of suicide, while the balance of mind was disturbed.

And Sergeant Brownall had called on the inspector to make a verbal report.

The cubby-hole was small enough to start with—but, with two big men in it, it seemed almost overcrowded.

'Well, son?' continued Higgins, after a long period of silence.

Sergeant Brownall fidgeted in his chair. 'It—it's just a sort of hunch, sir. I'm not satisfied, somehow. The man was shot through the head and was sprawled over his typewriter. I got the bullet out of the wall but it was too misshapen to tell for sure whether or not it was fired from the revolver at his feet. All possible identifying marks were gone.

though the experts tell me the weight was right. He was locked in his office and the key was in his jacket pocket. Nobody seems to have heard the shot. Langley's prints were all over the revolver—and no one else's.'

'And he left a farewell note, I understand,' commented Higgins.

'If you can call it that, sir. In the typewriter was a sheet of paper, headed "Chapter One". Underneath was a single line: "I can't go on." That *could* be a farewell note, I suppose—but it could also be the start of a new novel. Or, if it was murder, the murderer might have typed it.'

'H'm! You checked the typewriter keys, I suppose?'

'Of course, sir. Langley's prints all over 'em. But an astute murderer could deflect the keys by using a pencil or something like that.'

'He would need two pencils to operate the capital I and the apostrophe—to work the shift key.'

Brownall nodded. 'I thought of that—and checked on it. Nothing doing. But if you postulate one pencil, why not two?'

Inspector Higgins grinned. 'You die hard, son. Hadn't Langley any reason for doing himself in? I mean, broke or something like that?'

'He was practically broke, sir. But he'd got his job. Hadn't been in it long, of course, but he was holding it down.'

'Yet the chairman gave evidence that earlier in the evening Langley was a bundle of nerves.'

'That's right, sir. He left Langley answering the telephone while he went to check up on the revolver business. Langley had told him about finding the gun and—er—losing it again. Mr Quenlock said it sounded a lot of drivel but he couldn't find Oakfield, who'd already left the club.'

'H'm! A frame of snooker doesn't take him long, apparently.'

'Both he and Unwin are first-class players. Anyhow, Mr Quenlock decided to sleep on it, before tackling Langley again.'

'And the telephone call?'

'That's one of my points, sir. Nobody has come forward to admit phoning the club secretary that evening.'

'Understandable, I suppose—if what was said drove Langley to suicide,' said Higgins dryly.

Sergeant Brownall frowned. 'It *could* be, I suppose, sir,' he admitted at last. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

There was a silence. Then: 'You said "one of your points", sarge. What are the others?'

'There was only one chamber discharged from the revolver, sir. According to Oakfield there should have been two. At least . . .' The sergeant hesitated. 'It's all hearsay, sir. Oakfield says that Langley told him the gun had recently been fired. Oakfield doesn't know how true that is—for he didn't inspect the gun himself. Yet why should he lie about it?'

'And why should Langley, for that matter? Unless he'd already made up his mind and was—er—anticipating events.'

'That's what *I* think, sir. And if Langley wasn't lying and really *did* tell Oakfield what Oakfield says he did, then there should have been a second empty shell in that revolver—and there wasn't.'

'There's two ways out of that, sarge, to bolster up your murder theory. One: Langley was killed by a different revolver. And there I submit the murderer would have been extremely lucky; he couldn't *know* the bullet would be damaged beyond all hope of identification. Or, two: The murderer had a spare bullet which he exchanged for that already fired and—um—carried on from there.'

Brownall nodded agreement.

'And I suppose your idea is that this—um—murderer also had a duplicate key for the office which he used after putting the other key in Langley's pocket?'

Brownall nodded again.

Inspector Higgins raised one eyebrow. 'Getting rather complicated, aren't we?' he asked, smilingly.

Sergeant Brownall remained glumly silent, staring blankly into the middle distance, as though loath to abandon his hunch yet conscious of the flimsy nature of his suspicions. Slowly he shook his head from side to side.

'Any other points, sarge?' inquired Higgins briskly.

The sergeant's half smile was a little deprecatory. 'Oakfield,' sir,' he replied. 'He didn't say a word to Unwin during the

snooker frame immediately after the incident of the revolver. In fact, it wasn't until I tackled him after seeing Mr Quenlock that he said anything about it—and then I had more or less to drag it out of him.'

'People don't like being mixed up in murder, son,' responded Higgins. 'Or suicide, for that matter.'

'But neither point had arisen when he was first with Unwin—and yet he kept quiet about it all.' Brownall raised his eyes to the inspector's face. 'He's the type who glories in racy stories. I ~~had~~ would have thought he would have jumped at the chance of the new secretary's loaded revolver. Quite a spicy bit of club scandal, as it were.'

'H'm! What's your theory? That he was keeping it up his sleeve for—um—later use? Blackmail or something like it?'

'It could be. He's the type, I should say.'

Inspector Higgins suddenly chuckled. 'I take it that we don't like Mr Oakfield,' he said blandly.

Brownall's face went slightly pink. 'I don't, sir,' he said in forthright tones. 'He's the smoothy type. All-pals-together. A back-smacker. A what-about-a-snifter, mine's-a-bitter merchant. Flaunts a wealth I'll lay even money he's never earned.' The sergeant's voice was a little acrid.

'And I suppose he patronized you a bit, son,' said Higgins kindly, nodding his head. 'It is apt to be a little galling, I know. But that doesn't make him a—er—murderer.'

'Oh, I'm not suggesting that, sir,' said Brownall hastily. 'It's a certainty it wasn't he who telephoned Langley. At least, according to Unwin it wasn't. But he left the club very quickly after their frame was finished and the chairman looked in the billiards room almost immediately after he had gone. Unwin was still there. But whether or not Oakfield left the club when he said he did there's no evidence. Nobody saw him leave. And he wasn't seen again till he turned up the following morning—when I was already there. The news was already in the papers about Langley's death—yet he did not volunteer any information about that revolver until I more or less dragged it out of him.'

'So what, son?' Inspector Higgins spread his large hands, palms upwards. 'You've got your verdict—suicide. That should end the case so far as we are concerned. What do

you want? Permission to delve a little further?' He shook his head from side to side, pursing his lips. 'We're short-handed enough as it is. I hardly think that I would be justified in . . .'

'I've still got some leave due to me, sir,' said Brownall.

'Like that, eh? Jerusalem! Your hunch must be very strong, sarge.' Higgins frowned as he peered into his underling's face. Young Brownall was such a stickler for rules, regulations and red tape—the three R's of officialdom—that his suggestion was just a little ~~out~~ of character. Did he propose to use his leave as an excuse for a little unorthodox investigation? To do things which in hypothetical harness he would never dream of doing? Or . . . 'What's the big idea, son?' he asked at last. 'What do you propose to do—or would you rather not tell me?'

'I was rather hoping you'd tell me, sir,' said Brownall. 'What would you do if you were in my place?'

Inspector Higgins leaned back in his chair to stare at the ceiling. He did not like to suggest that, in the sergeant's place, he would call it a day and forget it! Young Brownall seemed so desperately sincere. And if he were prepared to give up part of his annual leave . . . H'm! The bee must be big in his bonnet. Let's think. Assume it *was* murder, after all . . . Young Brownall must already have gone into the question of motive—and found none, or he would have enlarged upon it. It could hardly have been for money, for Langley was as near broke as dammit. Revenge? The inspector smiled to himself. Langley seemed to have had a very luke-warm, milk-and-water sort of existence. Jealousy? Hardly of his books, for Higgins had never even heard of him as a writer. A woman in the case? Langley had never married . . . and this was another point Brownall would surely have looked into. Let's forget motive for the time being. Let's concentrate on the mechanics of the hypothetical murder.

Inspector Higgins removed his gaze from the ceiling to find Brownall watching him with anxious eyes.

'Keys,' said Higgins at last.

'Keys, sir? I'm afraid that I . . .' Brownall trailed off in bewilderment.

'Yes. Keys. One found in Langley's pocket—the other used to lock the door. How many were there supposed to be?'

'Only the one, sir, according to Mr Quenlock, the chairman.'

'H'm! Then someone must have had a duplicate made.'

'But Quenlock told me that, during his short time in office, Langley always kept the key on his person. In fact the chairman had advised him to do so to prevent members always popping in and out whilst he was away from his office.'

'And we can absolve Langley from having another key made. H'm! What about his predecessor? He could have had another key—and might have kept it.'

Sergeant Brownall frowned. 'It was a man named Cockell, sir. I hadn't given him a thought.'

'H'm! I should, if I were you—and you intend to go on with this—um—business.' Higgins had nearly said 'tomfoolery'—but stopped himself just in time. 'Perhaps he left under a cloud, or something like that. Oh, yes. And there's another thing—billiards chalk.'

This time Brownall looked thoroughly startled. 'Billiards chalk, sir?' he echoed—leaving his mouth half open.

'M'yes. I can understand a chap knocking off a single piece—but to pinch over a hundred seems rather to be overdoing it.'

'But—but what can that possibly have to do with Langley's death, sir? I mean . . .'

'It more or less started it, didn't it, son? The chalk's missing. Oakfield comes along to get some from Langley, knowing that Cockell might have left a stray piece behind. Cockell again, you see,' in parenthesis and rather warming up to the sergeant's hunch. 'And so the weapon is spotted in that cardboard box. And . . .' The inspector broke off. 'I suppose it *was* the same revolver which . . .'

'Oakfield described it to me before details were issued to Press. I think we *must* take it that it was the same weapon . . .'

'Right.' Higgins spread his hands. 'There you are, sarge. You've something to work on. And—um—I should check up on your pal Oakfield.' The inspector smiled. 'I

don't suppose you'll get him for murder—but you might tie a can to his tail for something else . . . and that'll give you a big laugh.' Inspector Higgins tapped a bundle of papers on his desk into some semblance of symmetry. 'All right, son. I—um—hope you enjoy your leave. But don't waste too much time on it.'

Sergeant Brownall rose to his feet. 'Thank you, sir. Thank you very much indeed.'

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The following morning Brownall, too, hit the headlines. And, according to the *Daily Sentinel*, achieved unexpected eminence. Its headline read:

PROMINENT YARD MAN ATTACKED

But then, perhaps, any Scotland Yard officer, in similar circumstances, would have been deemed distinguished.

And, so far as Inspector Higgins was concerned, he was now in this case up to his neck. No thug was going to attack one of his boys and get away with it.

Chapter Three

INQUIRY

INSPECTOR HIGGINS held a whispered consultation with the sister outside the casualty ward of the Portland Hospital, to be told—somewhat non-committally—that Sergeant Brownall was getting on as well as could be expected. He shook his head at this dire news and proceeded to tiptoe his elephantine way across the polished floor of the ward towards a screen in the far corner. He took a deep breath and peeped round the screen.

To find the sergeant, albeit with a bandage round his head, sitting up in bed smoking a surreptitious cigarette, was a little too much. Such was his relief that the inspector momentarily forgot himself.

‘And what the blue blazes have you been up to, you silly chump?’ he blared in forthright tones.

Sergeant Brownall blinked and swallowed.

‘I—I don’t know, sir,’ he said unhappily.

‘That helps, don’t it?’ Higgins eased himself round the screen, pulled a chair to the bedside, seated himself and glared at the sergeant. He sniffed heavily. ‘Suppose you tell me what you don’t know,’ he added, with more aggression than lucidity.

Brownall blinked again—though he rather guessed what the inspector was driving at.

Ten minutes later Inspector Higgins leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully scratched the tip of his nose. ‘Let’s see if I’ve got this right,’ he said. ‘You go back to the Rosemary Club and start making what you think are judicious inquiries. You have a feeling that this—um—re-opening of a case which is closed is somewhat resented. The fact that this may be another of your—um—hunches is neither here nor there. Mr Oakfield tells you more or less point blank to go and boil your head. Mr Quenlock is polite but a little

snooty. You have a chat with the doorkeeper and let slip that you hope to have another talk with Oakfield when he comes out. Neat touch that, son,' nodding his head in commendation. 'And then you wait ostentatiously outside the main entrance to the club until the doorkeeper sneaks away inside the club on some unspecified errand. Then you promptly skedaddle round to the back exit and wait for Oakfield to emerge.'

'That's right, sir. I guessed that the doorkeeper . . .'

'Quite. Quite. This rear exit, now. Where's it come out?'

'There's a sort of well in the middle of the club, sir. You know the sort of thing. Not quite big enough to be called a courtyard but room for half a dozen cars, with a tunnelled archway beneath the building leading to the street. The resident members use it mostly. In fact I believe they have some sort of exclusive right to leave their cars there. And there's a door into the well from the main building.'

'And this was the door your pal Oakfield sneaked out from. H'm! And then you followed him through a maze of back streets and suddenly "Wham!"—you'd had it.'

'That's right, sir,' said Brownall, cautiously caressing the back of his head.

'H'm! And you don't think Oakfield had anything to do with it?'

'I'd like to, sir. But he never once looked round. Just went on his way, quite oblivious that I was on his tail. I'm practically certain of that.'

'So what?' Inspector Higgins scratched his nose again. 'It might have been an old lag paying off old scores—but I doubt it. You lost neither watch nor wallet, so it wasn't theft. H'm!' He transferred his fingernail to his scalp. 'At a guess, your pal Oakfield was leading a procession of three—with you in the middle.'

'I don't get it, sir.'

'You follow Oakfield and somebody follows you. Or . . . H'm! . . . Yes. Someone *else* is interested in Oakfield. That's more like it. Finds he's got a rival in the business and—um—eliminates rival.' The inspector nodded his head in self-agreement. He looked at the sergeant. 'Did you see any-

one else hanging around while you were waiting for Oakfield to come out?’

‘No, sir. I wasn’t looking for anyone else, sir.’

‘Quite,’ dryly. Inspector Higgins rose to his feet. ‘I’m taking over now, son. You just sit back and—um—enjoy your leave.’ He nodded adieu and was gone . . . leaving behind a somewhat woebegone sergeant who stared blankly at the screen surrounding the bed and wondered what he could possibly have done to make the old man so mad.

It was not until the inspector had almost reached the Rosemary Residential Club that he realized that his contention to Brownall of a procession of three could not hold water without an element of coincidence—and Higgins was very chary of coincidence. The hypothetical third member of the trio must have been very lucky to have picked up Oakfield when he did. He could not have known that Oakfield was going to leave the club suddenly—and by the back exit. Nor could Brownall, for that matter—but the sergeant had more or less engineered it, with his subtle ‘slip’ to the doorkeeper. Brownall’s luck was that he had rightly guessed Oakfield’s reactions. So what? Higgins halted momentarily. Of course! The hypothetical third man interested in Oakfield’s actions must also be a member of the club. Keeping an eye on him inside, he would be quite aware that Oakfield was slipping out the rear exit. And would follow. And Brownall could hardly have been expected to see the man if he did not leave the club until after Oakfield himself had left.

Well, well!

A few minutes later Inspector Higgins was standing at the rear of the Rosemary Club peering through the covered archway to the diminutive quadrangle beyond. From the street he could see the doorway leading to the back of the club; at the moment there were no cars parked in the small open space. The inspector walked through the arched tunnel, stopped at the end and peered upward. There were several windows overlooking the well—mostly of frosted glass. Anyone interested above could certainly keep an eye on the comings and goings of members. Perhaps a watcher up here had seen Oakfield go out and . . . H’m! What did it matter, anyway?

'Want anything?' inquired a harsh, intimidating voice.

Higgins turned quickly. The man matched his voice. He was large, barrel-chested and belligerent; he was scowling; his chin was out-thrust and he leered at the inspector through lowered eyelids; two brawny fists rested on his narrow hips; he stood astraddle.

'I was wondering whether I might park my car here,' said Higgins mildly.

'Well, you can't.'

'You own the place?' inquired the inspector, raising one eyebrow.

'Now don't get funny, mister. Scram.' And the man removed one fist from his hip to jerk a large thumb over his shoulder.

Inspector Higgins eyed the man speculatively. He wasn't used to being bullied and disliked it intensely. Yet, if he hoped to conduct a few discreet inquiries about some of the members of this club, the last thing he wanted at the very outset was a fierce argument on the club premises. It went against the grain, of course, but it would seem better for the moment to take the man's advice and scam.

Higgins shrugged his broad shoulders. 'No need to get hot under the collar,' he said—and passed into the tunnel leading to the street . . . ignoring the contemptuous smirk on the man's features.

And there the incident might have ended but for a sudden kick in the rear for good measure which brought the inspector momentarily to his knees. He jumped up and turned. The large man's derisive laugh was cut short as a large fist smacked on his cheekbone. The inspector's follow-up caught the man on his barrel chest and he staggered backwards through the tunnel into the courtyard behind. There he regained his balance and a look of berserk fury crossed his features. He let out a bellow of rage and charged. Higgins side-stepped and clipped the man on the ear. Then waded in. He drove the man backwards with a couple of quick lefts and a right . . . and then administered the *coup de grâce*—a pile-driver which seemed to start at the concrete floor of the courtyard and finish on the man's chin. Even as the man's shoulder hit the opposite door, with such force that it

was a wonder it was not smashed open, Inspector Higgins was brushing the tips of his fingers together and advancing towards him.

The man opened his eyes and jerked up an arm in self-defence.

Inspector Higgins looked sourly downwards. 'For two pins,' he said, in a mild conversational tone of voice, 'I'd kick your blasted teeth in—for luck.' He leaned forward, grasped the man by the knot of his tie and jerked him to his feet. 'Thank your lucky stars,' he said, 'that I'm not really cross. Had I been I might have hurt you.'

He released his hold and the man slumped back against the door. The inspector stood over him for a few moments—the saturnine smile on his face almost matching the man's smirk a couple of minutes back. 'Well? Any questions?'

The man remained mumchance.

Higgins nodded grimly and turned—surprised to find that a car was backing out of the tunnel. Dammit! His concentration had been such that he had not even heard the car come in! And then the door opened and Higgins turned again.

'What's going on here?' asked a gentleman, somewhat querulously—surveying the large man at his feet and then peering upward into the inspector's face.

Higgins grinned. 'A slight altercation, that's all.'

'Indeed?' The gentleman looked down again—and stared at the large man with a well-shod foot. 'Get up, Kento,' he ordered. 'I expect you asked for it. You always were officious.' Then, as the large man dragged himself slowly to his feet: 'Get on with whatever it is you're supposed to be doing,' he said—nodding authoritatively—and turned to Higgins. 'If you care to come inside I'll give you a brush down,' indicating with his forefinger the dust on the knees of the inspector's trousers.

But Higgins was still watching the large man, half expecting a renewal of hostilities the moment his back was turned. But the man, not surprisingly, seemed to have had enough of it. From a safe distance he gave the inspector a leer of sheer malevolence; then lurched away.

The inspector shrugged his shoulders. Then turned to the

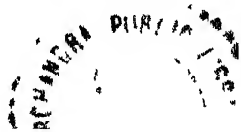
gentleman in the doorway. 'That's very kind of you, sir,' he said, 'but . . .'

'Not at all. Not at all. Come inside.' And he stood to one side for the inspector to enter. Together they traversed a long carpeted passage, then a flight of stairs leading upwards . . . with Higgins wondering what he might have let himself in for. For one thing, he had most effectively advertised his interest in the club—but he didn't blame himself for that. He could stand so much indignity but no more! He had learned something else, too—that there was a most efficient watch kept on the rear of the premises. He was asking himself why. And there was another point. The gentleman leading the way up the stairs had been quick to take sides. What had *he* got against that beefy bully with the bellicose bark and the practically non-existent bite? And who *was* he anyway?

It was as though the other had read his thoughts for, as they reached a doorway at the top of the stairs he said: 'I'm one of the residents here. Fanworth's the name.' He opened the door and waved the inspector inside.

Higgins admitted his name but not his rank and Mr Fanworth was very solicitous. He brushed the inspector down with a clothes-brush taken from the rack in a diminutive hall, expressed a hope that Mr Higgins would forget the unfortunate episode and not think too harshly of the Rosemary Residential Club because of a misdemeanour by one of its servants. . . . Again taking sides! . . . and did not cease his inconsequential chatter till pulled up short by a sudden cacophony from the room within. Then he jerked a cuff to con the dial of his wrist-watch.

And Higgins stared at the closed door. Never before in his life had he heard so many clocks chiming at once. One alone might have been musical; many, of differing key and timbre, a little too much for the sensitive ear. The inharmonious humming slowly died away; Mr Fanworth, though still staring at his wrist-watch, seemed to be waiting for something. Seconds passed and Mr Fanworth started to smile—a gentle loosening of the lips indicating some subtle pleasure . . . which froze on his face when a further clock, presumably belated, started to chime—mellifluous and dignified.



'Damn!' said Mr Fanworth, who walked to the door and flung it open.

Inspector Higgins merely stood and stared. The room within was packed almost to capacity with clocks of all shapes and sizes; the pitapat of pendula almost continuous . . . insidious, faintly nerve-racking. And all, so far as the inspector could see, registering precisely the same time. Mr Fanworth halted before a grandfather clock, opened the door at the foot and stopped the pendulum. With meticulous forefinger and thumb he made a minute adjustment to the screw below the weight; then gently swung the pendulum again. Then he looked across to the inspector.

'I'm a stickler for time,' he said—in a censorious tone of voice.

'So I—gathered,' responded Higgins.

'Time is of the very essence of business. The man who first said time is money knew what he was talking about. The B.B.C. with its time signals throughout the day renders a great service. Watches can be synchronized. TIM of the telephone service is an invaluable adjunct to accuracy of timing. If I fix up anything for say eleven o'clock I don't mean ten-fifty-nine nor eleven-one—but eleven o'clock precisely. But you would never believe the trouble one has in . . . ' Mr Fanworth broke off. 'Are you interested in clocks, by the way?' he asked.

'Well—er—I . . . '

'Good.' He beckoned with an imperious forefinger and the inspector, almost hypnotized, advanced to the door of the room. Mr Fanworth's forefinger swung round to point to a clock on the mantelshelf. 'That's a Tompion,' he said. 'Thomas Tompion. Inventor of the balance wheel and hair-spring. It's over two hundred and fifty years old—and still goes if I let it . . . which I don't. Too valuable. This one here'—indicating the grandfather clock he had just adjusted—'is only eighty years old.'

Higgins smiled. 'A sort of juvenile delinquent, one might say.'

Mr Fanworth was not amused. In fact it is doubtful if he even saw the point. He stood frowning at the inspector for a few moments, then: 'Horology is an exact science,' he began

oracularly—and then stopped, as though he had suddenly lost the thread of his oration. Inspector Higgins wondered what could possibly have happened to divert the other's attention. He grinned. One of the clocks must have stopped or something.

Then Mr Fanworth pulled himself together. He jerked his cuff with that familiar action to glance once more at his wrist-watch. Considering that he was surrounded by clocks, most of which told the same time, the action seemed, to say the least, a little superfluous.

'I'm afraid, Mr Higgins, that I—um . . .'

The inspector got it in one. 'I must go,' he said. 'Perhaps some other time . . .'

'Of course. Of course.' Mr Fanworth hustled the inspector to the outer door of the apartment. 'Sorry you can't stop. It's nice to have met you.'

About ten seconds later the inspector found himself once more in that quadrangle. He grinned to himself. 'The bum's rush,' he muttered. And then stared thoughtfully at a few spots of oil on the concrete surface. They had certainly not been there before, for this was the very spot the beefy Kenton . . .

'Hallo-allo.' Inspector Higgins started to walk towards the tunnel leading to the street, fully aware that Mr Fanworth might be discreetly watching from up above.

Fanworth. Higgins had deemed the man to be slightly crackers—at least, so far as clocks were concerned. But . . . H'm! The surly Kenton had tried to use force to keep the inspector away from the courtyard. Had Fanworth used finesse—for the very same purpose? The invitation to go inside . . . the sedulous activity with the clothes-brush . . . the homily on time . . . clocks . . . and the sudden cessation of what promised to be a lengthy lecture on horology . . .

Of course. It *might* have been that Mr Fanworth had—somehow—been given the all clear.

Well, well, well. The inspector crossed to a convenient call box on the opposite side of the road.

Chapter Four

ORDERS

INSPECTOR HIGGINS, ensconced in the telephone kiosk and ostensibly using the instrument, stared thoughtfully into the mirror before him, in which he could just see the opening into the street from that quadrangle of the Rosemary Residential Club. The fact that he was probably concentrating on the legendary locked door of an empty stable didn't help much.

Mr Fanworth was still on his mind. The scrap with the man Kenton—such as it was—had lasted a mere matter of seconds. It might be that Fanworth had seen the fracas from his window and had come down to investigate. If so, he had been mighty quick off the mark. Alternatively he might have been waiting behind that doorway for some appointment or other. And that, for a man of such alleged punctuality and precision, seemed to suggest that the appointment was as near due as dammit. In that case . . .

Higgins scowled into the mirror. Was it Kenton he was waiting for? H'm! Probably not. He had told the man to get on with his job, whatever it might be. And . . . Jerusalem! That car which he had seen backing out of the passageway just before Fanworth had appeared at the door! Higgins had only just remembered the incident. It had crossed his mind at the time that he had not even *heard* the car come into the quadrangle place. Of course he hadn't. The car had been driving blithely in . . . the driver had seen the spot of bother between Higgins and Kenton . . . and had promptly backed out again. Very cagey, to say the least. But dead on time if his appointment had been with the meticulous Mr Fanworth.

Higgins clenched his eyelids and concentrated. That car now. In his mind's eye he again saw the covered bricked archway with the bonnet of a car slowly receding out of sight. What make? Dammit! One would have thought that, with all his experience and years of training, his mind would automatically have registered . . . Yes. It was an Ocelot.

That's right. And—and . . . Black? H'm! Darkish, anyway. And the number? The inspector screwed up his face and tapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. The number. He was practically certain it was numerals first with letters following. So it was a new registration, anyhow. And yet . . . and yet the impression remained that it was *all* number's—which couldn't be. Unless . . . Of course! The three letters were actually Roman numerals. Higgins ran through them in his mind. I . . . V . . . X . . . L . . . M . . . C' . . . Dammit! Half the alphabet seemed to be needed for Roman numerals . . .

Inspector Higgins half opened one eye, was momentarily startled by the reflection of his own diabolical grimace in the mirror and then nearly shied at the sudden ringing of the telephone bell beneath his elbow. Lifting the instrument from its cradle was an almost automatic reaction. Even as he did so he realized that a call to a telephone kiosk was undoubtedly a wrong connexion . . .

'Quick,' said an urgent metallic voice. 'Feller just about passing you now. Hefty build. On the stout side. Trilby hat. Double-breasted blue suit. Walks with a bit of a swagger. Follow and report.' The line went dead and then started to emit the dialling tone. Inspector Higgins scowled at his reflection in the mirror as he thoughtfully replaced the instrument on its rest. Now what the deuce . . .? Come to think of it, the description might almost fit himself—save that no one could possibly call him stout . . . and it wasn't a swagger but a serene self-confidence in his own ability to look after himself . . . He squared his broad shoulders, subconsciously contracted his stomach muscles and thereby expanding his huge chest, and again lifted the instrument from its cradle.

He placed three pennies in the slot and dialled. A minute later he left the telephone box and strolled away, to become almost immediately immersed in the window display of the shop at the corner, entirely oblivious of the fact that it was comprised chiefly of the more intimate garments of ladies' underwear.

That telephone box, now. For one thing it was in a very handy position if someone within the Rosemary Club should wish to communicate with someone outside. Already he had reasoned that there was a very effective watch kept on the

rear exit. The call box might even explain how somebody had got so quickly on to the sergeant's tail when he had been following Oakfield. A similar sort of phoned message would suffice. 'Oakfield has just left. Check up,' or something like that. And young Brownall would unwittingly have come between the two. H'm! And if his surmise was correct and the recent terse instructions were intended for a watcher outside the club, then the hypothetical watcher couldn't possibly be the beefy Kenton, for then that rather unflattering description would not have been necessary.

Had it been the mysterious Mr Fanworth telephoning? Higgins pursed his lips and shook his head doubtfully. Might have been, of course, but the metallic distortion was such that . . .

Inspector Higgins suddenly stiffened, stared unseeingly at a diminutive lace Bikini on a buxom female torso made of glass, and metaphorically cocked an ear.

Was that a distant telephone bell? His eyes swivelled towards the call box.

A little man scuttled across the road and vanished within.

Inspector Higgins grinned. We'd got a bite, seemingly. He strode towards the telephone kiosk. And it was immediately apparent that the little man inside was in a bit of a quandary. He had the instrument to his ear and was bellowing repeated Hallo's in a squeaky voice distinctly audible outside; then he wagged the rest with a grubby forefinger. The inspector nodded. Those had been his precise instructions: ring the number, sit tight and say nowt.

At last the man slammed the instrument back into place and turned. Higgins yanked open the door of the kiosk.

'Hallo, Shorty,' he said in a welcoming tone of voice.

The little man stared aghast. 'Blimey! It's Higgins,' he said.

The inspector nodded. 'How right you are. And what the heck do you think you're up to?' he inquired genially.

'What—me? Why, nothing, mister. Nothing at all. I—I was just . . . just phoning me bookie. I . . .' He trailed off into silence at the expression on the inspector's face. Then slowly emerged from the box in response to a large beckoning forefinger.

'You and I are going to have a little talk,' said Higgins, gently gripping the man's elbow. 'I have a conveyance waiting.'

'But—but I ain't done nothing, mister. I'm running straight, I am. I . . .'

'*This way.*'

The inspector strode majestically towards the corner; the little man trotted alongside, willy-nilly, almost propelled by the fingers on his elbow. No sooner had the pair turned the corner—past the shop with its fascinating window display—than a mobile police car drew to the kerb.

Inspector Higgins nodded his thanks. 'Nice work,' he said. Then opened the rear door. 'Hop in, Shorty Webb.'

'But . . . but . . .'

'Inside, I said.' Higgins incontinently bundled the man into the car and followed him in. 'Just drive around for a bit,' he said to the driver—and then turned to the little man. 'Now then. Let's have it.'

'I—I'm running straight, I tell you. You—you ain't got nothing on me. I'll have my lawyer on you for this. I . . .'

'Who are you working for?'—breaking into the tirade.

'A gentleman,'—with invidious emphasis.

The inspector grinned. 'I get the point,' he said amiably. 'And what's the gentleman's name?'

'I don't know.' There was such an element of triumph in the little man's voice that Higgins was constrained to believe him.

The inspector scratched the tip of his nose with his little fingernail. 'H'm! All right. What do you do for a living? I mean *now*,' he added nastily. 'I know what you did in the past.'

'I—I just run messages,' replied Webb, reluctantly.

'What sort of messages?'

'Look here, mister. I . . .'

'Hold it. You've been "inside" on one or two occasions, haven't you?'

'I've bin framed, if that's what you mean.'

Higgins nodded equably. 'Fair enough. If you can believe that, then it won't strain your imagination much to believe you could be framed again.'

'Wadder mean?' The little man suddenly sat up in his seat.

'What I say. There are one or two little jobs still—um—open on our books. And Shorty Webb *could* fill the bill if we tried hard enough,' in a meditative tone of voice.

'But—but . . . You wouldn't . . . I mean . . .'

'Now then, Shorty. You answer that call-box telephone, don't you?'—more a statement than a question.

'No harm in that.'

'Quite. So you can tell me all about it.'

'I—I just does what I'm told.'

'Such as . . .?' And the inspector raised inquisitive eyebrows.

'W-e-l-l. I—I just take the messagelike. And—and pass it on.'

'To whom?'

'I—I don't know.'

Inspector Higgins snorted his disgust. 'Look here, Webb,' he said forcefully. 'Suppose you answered that telephone and a voice told you to follow someone . . . *me*, for example . . . and report.' He tapped the little man on the knee. 'To whom would you report?'

'Why, nobody, mister.'

The inspector's mighty exhalation of breath was so charged with exasperation that the little man almost wilted.

'I—I mean,' he added hastily, 'I—I'd just sit back until he telephoned again and . . .'

'He? Who?'

'The—the gentleman. And—and when he phoned I—I'd just tell him. That's all.'

Inspector Higgins frowned as he stared at the back of the driver's peaked cap. So *that* was the set-up. The call box was just a clearing house for messages. All possibly very cryptic, though Shorty Webb probably hadn't sufficient intelligence to read between lines. And a call box could be very useful for any criminal organization. Would take a bit of tracing for one thing—and wouldn't give much away if it *were* traced. Moreover it would provide a most efficient break between two correspondents, one of whom wished to remain anonymous—or, at least, somewhat shy as to his precise address.

The inspector leaned forward and depressed the switch of the radio transmitter.

'Information Room. Information Room. Higgins here.'

A disembodied voice made prompt reply. 'Sir?'

'This is urgent. Get the Post Office to monitor PORTland 8561. It's a call box, so they shouldn't be too sticky. All

messages in and out. And where to and from, if possible.' 'PORTland 8561. Right, sir.'

Higgins switched off and turned to Shorty Webb. 'How do you get paid?' he barked.

'Kenton . . . I mean a pal o' mine . . .' The little man broke off in confusion.

'All right. All right.' The inspector waved a hand and scowled thoughtfully into the middle distance. 'You know, Webb, you're a bit of a problem,' he said at last, musingly. 'I can't have you galloping back to report to your mysterious gentleman. And I don't particularly want to stick you in the cooler.'

'You—you dassn't.' Webb sounded horror-stricken.

'Think not?' Higgins grinned. 'I should **keep** my big mouth shut, if I were you. Let me think. H'm! We can hold you for twenty-four hours without a charge. If you can behave yourself that long perhaps there won't *be* any charge.' The inspector sat upright. 'All right, constable. You can drop me here. Take Mr Webb back to the Yard and—er—make him comfortable.'

The police car drew to the kerb and the inspector alighted, with a valedictory wave of his hand. Shorty Webb's responsive gesture was not so nice. The car pulled away.

Five minutes later Inspector Higgins paused at the end of Rosemary Street, undecided as to whether or not he should call at the club in his official capacity to start things humming. Yet he did not wish to vitiate more circumspect activities already afoot. And as he stood there he suddenly realized that there must be some sort of commotion going on in Blacksmith Lane, the next turning—judging from the suspended animation of a crowd of rubbernecks at the end of the street.

A few moments later he had joined the throng and hurried along the lane . . . towards an interested crowd. And then he halted.

'Very, very clever,' he muttered—shaking his head from side to side in sheer disillusion. For the telephone kiosk, almost opposite the rear exit from the Rosemary Club, had been completely wrecked—at a guess by some sort of bomb. Smoke was still rising from the shambles.

Chapter Five

ASSAULT

THE fire brigade and a police car arrived almost simultaneously and forced a passage through the crowd, whilst Inspector Higgins remained on the fringe. He was quite certain in his own mind that whoever had wrecked the kiosk was far away by now—yet he did not wish openly to associate with his colleagues in case the wrecker was still nearby observing the result of his handiwork. And Higgins was fully confident that the officers now on the job could find out all there was to know . . . and was prepared to lay a hundred to six that this would be very little.

And there was another individual to the forefront of the crowd, very busy with pencil and note-book. The almighty Press, as usual, was quick on the job . . . which meant that the destruction of the kiosk would be most effectively advertised—free—and interested parties, not in the know, suitably warned. Hold it, though. Call boxes were ten a penny . . . and unless the actual telephone number were divulged . . .

‘An extraordinary happening, don’t you think, Mr Higgins?’

The inspector turned, to find a hatless Mr Fanworth staring benignly up into his face.

‘It is, isn’t it?’ agreed the inspector, covertly inspecting the other for some tell-tale sign that he might even have been responsible. Nothing doing, of course. No self-respecting saboteur would deliberately invite detection.

‘Another I.R.A. pinprick, do you think? Or strike action of some sort? Definitely a malcontent of some sort, I should say. It’s a wonder nobody was hurt. It made quite a noise, didn’t it?’

‘I’m afraid I never heard it.’

‘Didn’t you? I should have thought you must have done. It was at eleven-thirty precisely. Might almost have been timed for then. My clocks were just chiming the half-hour.

And I'm sure you'll be glad to know that your—er—delinquent was practically in step. An infinitesimal adjustment will surely . . .'

'You were in your room at the time?'

'Why, of course. How could I have heard my clocks chime if . . .'

'I meant that I rather gathered you had an—er—appointment when I was with you.'

Mr Fanworth looked up again into the inspector's face and smiled. 'That was a ruse, if you will forgive me, Mr Higgins,' he said, with unbelievable naïvety. 'You—you see, I have just realized that I didn't know you from Adam and—and, my collection is of great value. It suddenly occurred to me that . . .' He shrugged his shoulders and smiled whimsically. 'You will forgive me, won't you?' he asked.

'Well, sir. You asked me in in the first place. I didn't invite myself.'

'I know, I know. But I am so impulsive. And Kenton is apt to be so high-handed. I didn't want you to get a wrong impression. You were looking for a place to park your car, I understand.'

'So you have spoken with Kenton?' raising one speculative eyebrow.

'Naturally. And I'm sorry we cannot accommodate you. That courtyard is for my own exclusive use, you see. And the gates are shut periodically and . . .'

'Gates?' Inspector Higgins turned to survey the tunnelled archway.

'Yes. And—— Good gracious me! They're shut now!'

As they were. Steel. The lattice type which could be expanded and contracted and could be folded away compactly. The inspector hadn't noticed them before.

'It's part of Kenton's job to lock them. Do you know, Mr Higgins, that sometimes he is *seconds* late?' Mr Fanworth consulted his wrist-watch with the familiar callisthenics of his arm movement and scowled at the dial. 'And now, for some reason or other, he is fifteen minutes before time. Damnation! Now I shall have to use the front entrance.' Mr Fanworth clicked his tongue; then, without a word of farewell, started to pick his way daintily through the edge of

the crowd—and the next Higgins saw of him he was in conversation with the ubiquitous reporter . . . though which of the two had actually made contact, the inspector had not seen. Then Mr Fanworth was off again—and the other made a note in his book, and started to push his way out of the crowd. The inspector promptly edged along to intervene.

The reporter looked up at the large figure blocking his way.

‘Excuse me, please. I’m in a hurry,’ he said.

‘Press?’ inquired Higgins.

‘Free-lance. Why? Did *you* see it happen?’ Fishing for his note-book, and flicking open the pages with his thumb.

‘No. But . . .’

‘Nor did I. Just missed it. Unlucky. And nobody hurt, either.’ Which, the tone of the man’s voice suggested, was also a matter of regret. ‘I’ll have to give it a facetious write-up. So if you’ll excuse me . . .’

The man skipped to one side and scuttled away. And Inspector Higgins scowled at nothing in particular, for he had glimpsed the open page of the man’s note-book—and the only item he could decipher in a spate of symbols and hieroglyphics was the very last. POR 8 5 6 1. And it seemed a certainty that this must have been the information imparted by the knowledgeable Mr Fanworth.

Damnation! The only way now to stop publication of that number was to use the big stick. Was it worth it? An intelligent sub-editor *might* blue-pencil the actual number as being of no news value. But it was a cinch that if a big stick were used, the wrecking of a public call box would grow out of all proportion—and the entire Press would be on his toes like a ton o’ bricks. And he wasn’t prepared for that . . . yet.

The fire engine pulled away—and, with its going, public interest started to evaporate. The crowd thinned perceptibly.

Higgins still lingered. The kiosk had been destroyed with commendable promptitude. It stood out a mile that someone must have seen Shorty Webb being knocked off. After all, Higgins had made no bones about it—had not even tried to camouflage the man’s apprehension. And . . . Jerusalem! Yes! Somebody had phoned that kiosk giving instructions and slanderous description. His next instructions would

undoubtedly have been for someone to take Shorty's place whilst he was on his mission . . . otherwise the call box would have been without its unofficial attendant. And the newcomer would have arrived nicely in time to see Shorty Webb being carted away and would probably have followed him until he entered the police car.

That would be enough. The issuer of instructions would know that his original terse message had misfired—that someone else had got it. Who? Time to sort that out afterwards, but with Webb in police hands it rather looked . . .

And then action, swift action.

Inspector Higgins mentally kicked himself. He had thought himself so clever getting a call made to that kiosk so as to trap whoever answered it. But he surely ought to have realized that, with Shorty Webb supposedly on an errand, someone else would soon be along to take his place. And he had blithely stood by and . . .

'Chump!' he muttered. 'Half-cock Higgins, the half-wit!'

One thing, Fanworth, the clock man, must surely be in this up to his neck. It was fairly patent that he had deliberately sought out the inspector to establish his alibi—unprovable—that he had heard the explosion whilst in his room. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse?* Could be, of course. And actually to know the telephone number of the kiosk was surprising, to put it mildly. Yet not once had he addressed the inspector by his rank—nor given any indication that he even knew it. . . .

Higgins blew out his cheeks. He was getting nowhere at a rate o' knots . . . and didn't even know where he was trying to go.

And at that very moment he saw signs of movement behind those lattice gates. Well! Kenton, the beefy gate-keeper, was his only solid contact at the moment. He'd knock the man off and sweat something out of him. He was Shorty Webb's paymaster, for one thing. And . . .

But it wasn't Kenton behind those gates. Too slight and too . . . Dammit! It was a woman—in black. Fiddling at the lock. And in a bit of a sweat, too. H'm! Presumably the early locking of the gates had inconvenienced somebody

besides the mysterious Mr Fanworth. Yet Rosemary Residential was essentially a male club. It rather looked as though one of the residents . . .

The gates slid open the barest fraction; the woman squeezed through and sidled along the wall like a stage conspirator. That she did not pause even to glance at the wrecked kiosk on the other side of the road was surprising, to put it mildly . . . a most unfeminine phenomenon . . . and suggested an urgency far beyond any natural curiosity.

Inspector Higgins waited until she was turning by the shop on the corner and then discreetly fell in behind.

It was not until five minutes later that he realized that she was following the same route which Oakfield and Sergeant Brownall had traversed the previous evening.

And the thought made him wonder whether he, in turn, was the middle of a procession of three. He took his pipe from his pocket, paused to tap the bowl on his heel—and glanced backwards. H'm! No apparent whipper-in. Trilby Hat, on the other side of the road, might not be entirely disinterested, though . . . H'm! Better check up on it.

The inspector continued on his way and then crossed diagonally to the other side, some thirty yards ahead of Trilby Hat; then deliberately slackened his pace.

The footsteps behind him neared. The inspector had to admit to himself a modicum of definite unease at the actual moment the man caught him up and passed. It was so reminiscent of the Brownall incident for real comfort.

And then he had a view of a broad back, topped with a trilby hat . . .

False alarm. Still, better be safe than sorry. And he mustn't let the woman get too far ahead in case she wasn't really going where he thought she was.

But she still followed the Oakfield route . . . As did the man with the trilby hat, though from the opposite side of the road. But they would soon be breaking new ground, for a hundred yards ahead was the spot where young Brownall had been slugged.

It was not until the woman was well beyond that spot that she began to falter; hitherto she had been quite certain of her

way but now she slowed at each corner and was patently studying street names. Once she halted altogether and seemed about to retrace her steps. And the fact that the man in the trilby hat immediately crossed the road as though to intercept her, made Higgins increase his own pace to lessen the distance between them.

But apparently the woman had only stopped to speak to a man who had just emerged from an adjacent doorway. She had obviously asked him the way. And he responded with such a wealth of gesticulatory detail that, even from the distance, Higgins could construe from the mime the direction she should take. The second turning on the right (two fingers of the left hand held in the victory sign, with the right arm doing a breast stroke), then first on the left (right forefinger rigid, left arm swimming)—then straight on (both arms stretched forward).

And that, reflected the inspector—if his recollection of the topography of the district were correct—would land the lady in a cul-de-sac of three warehouse walls. He grinned to himself. Such forthright directions were invariably incorrect when accompanied with a wealth of detail!

The man was half-way through a repeat performance when the lady nodded her thanks and left him.

And Higgins realized he had mislaid the feller when the woman, after a brief glance at the name-plate on the wall, actually turned into Collier Close, the cul-de-sac.

Then he started to run, for Trilby Hat had followed her in. 'Let me go.' The woman's voice was shrill.

As the inspector lumbered round the corner the woman was struggling with Trilby Hat, who had her by the arms and was glaring into her face. She seemed more than frightened, she was terrified.

'Cut it out,' said Higgins—as he ambled towards them.

The man turned his head quickly and glared at the oncoming inspector. 'You keep out o' this, cock,' he snarled out of the side of his mouth. 'We don't want any interference from you. This is my missus.'

'W-why! I—I've never seen you before in m-my . . .'

The woman's tremulous denial was cut short as the man released one arm to give her a vicious slap on the side of her face.

'You keep your big trap shut. I...'. A large hand grabbed him by the collar, knocking off his trilby hat in the process, and a large fist clipped him on the chin.

The man shook his head and turned. The moment he released his hold of the woman she dropped to the ground. And Higgins was suddenly conscious that he had got his hands full—very full. A full-blooded right, which should have ended the business there and then, somehow failed to reach its target . . . the man's head was simply not there. And the next instant the inspector was covering up from a hail of blows which seemed to come from all directions. He parried a few but not enough.

The woman started to scream—a high-pitched teeth-edging screech upon screech which echoed round the walls and threatened to burst the ear-drums.

Higgins, perforce, had to give ground fast; he had the momentary satisfaction of landing a haymaker in the man's right eye and then caught his heel on the kerb. Even as Higgins was toppling backwards, off balance, he saw it coming and tried to avoid it, jerking his head to one side. Even so, a balled fist scraped along the side of his face and crashed just above his ear. Half a second later he was sprawled full length on his back, bumping the back of his head on the pavement in the process. A myriad pin-pointed lights blurred his vision. Dimly he heard the sound of running feet.

He sat up and grasped his head in his hands. Blast! He must be getting old. The last time he could remember having suffered such indignity was in that disastrous Police Heavyweight Final when he had learned the result almost as soon as it reached the Press. Now that *was* a wallop, if you like. But he had turned the tables at their next meeting—in the first round, too—and . . .

'Are—are you all right?'

Higgins collected his scattered thoughts and pulled himself together. He opened his eyes. The woman in black was bending over him solicitously—the white imprint of a hand on her cheek showed up with startling vividness . . . And she was much younger than the inspector had thought . . . in her late teens probably . . . and her sombre garb effectively

concealed . . . Jerusalem! She was a fine looking youngster.
'Shall I help you up?'

A wry smile crossed the inspector's face. 'I dare say I can manage,' he said—and scrambled to his feet.

The other man had vanished, leaving behind a somewhat battered trilby hat. The inspector stooped once more, to pick up the spoils. And a police car screeched to a halt by the opening, backed, then slewed into the cul-de-sac.

'What's going on here?' demanded an irate voice.

Chapter Six

FAITH

'SORRY, sir,' said the mobile officer. 'I didn't recognize . . .'
'Forget it. Did you see a hatless man galloping along the street? Probably got his right eye bunged up.'

'No, sir. We just got the gen from Information that there was trouble in Collier Close and . . .'

'A ggg, I suppose. Who sent it?'

'A call box, sir,' replied the officer. 'No name given. Call box traced easily enough but . . .'

'Damn call boxes,' said Higgins, with much feeling. 'All right. It doesn't matter. Some shy but public-spirited citizen, I guess. Know anything about these people?'—and the inspector waved a hand, airily indicating the warehouse walls.

'No, sir. Never have any trouble here, though.'

'H'm!' Higgins turned. 'And what about you, missie?' he asked. And was surprised to find in her eyes an expression almost of hostility.

'W-well,' she replied hesitantly, 'I—I don't really know anything about—well—anything, really. I—I'm trying to find out.'

'H'm!' Inspector Higgins raised one eyebrow and stared quizzically into the girl's troubled face. Then: 'Let's take a ride,' he suggested—and opened the door of the police car.

Reluctantly she stepped into the car; Higgins followed her in—and the car drove out of the cul-de-sac, scattering the small crowd which had collected at the end.

'Now then, missie,' said Higgins. 'What's the trouble?'

And the girl promptly burst into tears. Inspector Higgins sighed. Tears always embarrassed him—put him off his stroke, as it were. And . . . Dammit! His previous interview in a police car—with Shorty Webb—had probably broken all the Judges' Rules ever promulgated and would be a godsend to any defending counsel who ever heard of it! And

if he followed this up with a similar catechism of a weeping woman without even a police matron in attendance . . .

'You—you police are all a lot of—of disbelieving stinkers,' the girl sobbed into her tiny handkerchief.

Higgins coughed. 'I'll admit to a certain amount of—um—protective scepticism,' he said in a fatherly tone of voice. 'After all. If we believed everything we were told . . .'

'B-but you don't believe *anything*. That's your trouble. You're all a lot of . . . lot of . . .'

'Disbelieving stinkers,' suggested Higgins, helpfully.

'And so you are. All of you.' The girl snuffled. 'All except Mr Brownall, that is,' she added.

Inspector Higgins sat up with a jerk. 'Brownall? What's *he* got to do with it?'

'*He* doesn't believe that Henry killed himself.'

'Henry?' The inspector was still in the dark.

'Y-yes. Henry Langley. Lancelot Langley, if you like.'

And Higgins suddenly saw the light. More. It rather looked as if the sergeant's alleged hunch, over the death of the late secretary of the Rosemary Residential Club, had been more or less inspired by this little lady. Well, well. Young Brownall always was an impressionable sort of cuss. And the wily sergeant had not even mentioned her!

'And what was Mr Langley to you?' the inspector asked.

'He—he was my brother.' So *that* was why she was in such deep mourning.

'I . . . I see. Believe me, I'm very sorry,' said Higgins—and meant it.

'Then—then why don't you *do* something about it?' the girl cried.

'Perhaps we are,' quietly.

The girl's snuffling ceased. She inhaled deeply; then turned to peer up into the inspector's face. He eyed her gravely. There was a silence.

Then: 'So—so *that's* why you happened to be at Collier Close *just* now,' she said, nodding her head. 'I—I was very lucky. Thank you.' Her smile was rather winsome. 'Were you keeping a watch on the place? I . . . Oh, dear! I suppose I've rather spoiled things for you, haven't I?'

'H'm! I wouldn't know. Tell me.'

'Well, I mean if you were keeping an eye on the place and I . . .'

'That's the point. What were *you* doing there?'

'I—I was just looking around, like I said.'

The inspector sighed. 'And the rough gentleman? He claimed to be your husband, you may remember.'

'I—I don't know who he is.'

'He followed you from the back of the Rosemary Club.'

'He—he what? Then—then *you* must have done so, too.'

Inspector Higgins nodded. Apparently the young lady was not so dumb, after all. 'M'yes. You had some difficulty with the gates.'

'I was surprised to find them closed. It was lucky for me that you can open them from the inside—otherwise I should have been caught.'

'And what might have happened then?' asked Higgins, gravely inclining his head.

'Why—why . . . I should have got the sack, I suppose.'

The inspector shook his head from side to side. 'Suppose you tell me *all* about it,' he suggested, in a mild tone of voice.

It was hard work. For some reason or other the girl seemed to want to clam up—and Higgins had to delve for information.

Miss Langley had been abroad on a hitch-hiking holiday when her brother had died; it was not until she had picked up a stray English newspaper that she had learned of his death and she had promptly returned to England, too late even for the funeral. The report of the inquest had shocked her. That the police had been unable to trace any relative of the dead man was not surprising, for the pair rarely corresponded; but Miss Langley was inclined to think they hadn't even tried. She was not even aware that her brother had got his new job. But of one thing she was certain. Never, never, never, under any circumstances, would Henry have taken his own life. It was the last thing he would ever do.

The inspector merely grunted at this literal truism.

Then Miss Langley had her brainwave. With the inquest over it was obvious the police would do nothing more—she would have to do it herself. So she promptly applied at the club for the now vacant post of secretary. . . .

‘Under your own name?’ asked Higgins.

Well, no. She had thought it wiser, under the circumstances, to use a—er—*nom-de-guerre*. A very nice gentleman had interviewed her—a Mr Quenlock, the chairman—and he had explained that the secretaryship of the club was essentially a male occupation, but there was a vacancy on the dining-room staff which, with tips, might not be so bad. She had jumped at the chance. Today was her third day on the job, yet already she had made the acquaintance of Mr Oakfield, enduring his hearty innuendoes for the good of the cause. She had served him with coffee this morning when he had been deep in conversation with another member whom she did not know. He hadn’t ordered the coffee and she had more or less sneaked up on the pair of them. For the first time in their short acquaintance he was not his usual sunny self. In fact he had been violently rude. From which she gathered that his conversation with the other must have been of some moment. And all she had overheard were the words . . .

‘Collier Close,’ interposed the inspector, nodding his head energetically.

‘That’s right. And I was looking it up in the library when the clock gentleman came in.’

‘Mr Fanworth?’ The inspector scowled at nothing in particular.

‘That’s right. He’s very nice. He told me exactly how to get there and . . . well . . .’ She spread her hands expressively.

‘H’m! Does Mr Brownall know you’re working there?’

‘I haven’t had a chance to tell him yet.’ Again she spread her hands. ‘I’ve only seen him the once—when I called at Scotland Yard to see the officer in charge of my—my brother’s . . . I—I told him Henry couldn’t have done such a thing and—and he said he rather thought the same. He—he’s very nice, too.’

‘M’yes. You seem to have been meeting a lot of very nice people,’ said Higgins dryly. ‘But I’m not at all sure . . .’

‘Could you drop me at the club, please? I have to be on again at twelve-forty-five.’

‘That is what I’m not at all sure about, missie. It

might be—um—rather unsafe for you to go back there now.'

'But—but . . . My clothes. I—I mean . . . You don't imagine I'm wearing this awful rig-out because I like it, do you? The dining-room staff *have* to wear black—and my clothes . . . What's the matter?'

'Er—nothing, missie.' So *that* was why she was in such deep mourning, was it? He snorted with self-derision. Half-cock Higgins again—improving with time. 'Do you—um—live at the club?'

'Oh, no. I've got temporary digs at a youth hostel. But if we waste much more time I'll get the sack in any case and . . .'

'All right, miss. If you're on the day staff you *should* be all right. But—um—make a point of ringing Scotland Yard every morning and evening. Just to—um—pass the time of day. Ask for me. Higgins is the name. Inspector Higgins. And leave a message if I'm not there. And, of course, if you *should* have anything to report. . . .'

'Yes, yes. I understand. 'This *is* exciting, isn't it?'

'*Is it?*' said Higgins, his voice suggesting a vast disillusion.

The police car drew to a halt at the end of Rosemary Street; Higgins watched her walk up the steps of the main entrance of the Rosemary Residential Club, with a measure of misgiving somewhat hard to define. He *hoped* she would be all right—and couldn't for the life of him see why she should be . . . at least, whilst on the club premises. It was when she left the club in the evening that . . . H'm. He would have to see about it. One of the younger bloods at the Yard would probably be only too pleased to provide an escort. . . .

'Calling all cars. Calling all cars.' The metallic disembodied voice from Information cut across the inspector's thoughts; he gave it his undivided attention.

'Blue-black Ocelot. Latest model. Index number blank blank blank X C V. Three numerals X C V. Believed responsible for wages snatch ten-fifty this morning. West End. Repeat. Blue-black Ocelot . . .'

Inspector Higgins sat as one in a trance. Was it *his* car or was that wishful thinking? Again he could see in his mind's eye that car backing out of the quadrangle at the rear of the

Rosemary Residential Club. It might, of course, have been just pulling in the opening there in order to turn . . . The time was about right . . . Those multitudinous clocks of Mr Fanworth had certainly chimed eleven very shortly afterwards . . . The district was right, too. But ten-fifty! And now it was as near twelve-fifty as dammit! The car, whether 'his' or not, could be half-way to China by now! Information seemed sadly slow off the mark.

' . . . ten-fifty this morning. West End. Message ends. Further message. Cars in West End only. Keep look-out for Inspector Higgins. Ask him to ring headquarters.'

'Eh? What's that?' The inspector's startled inquiry might almost have been heard at headquarters—for the voice immediately began a repeat of the further message. Higgins leaned forward. 'Cruise along till we come to a kiosk,' he ordered.

'Use the radio, sir,' suggested the mobile officer. 'Should be quicker.'

'Should it?' snarled Higgins nastily. 'And do you think whoever it is wants me, is hanging around the radio at Information on the off chance that I . . .'

'Sorry sir.'

The car lurched forward with such momentum that Higgins was thrown back on his seat.

Two minutes later he was dialling headquarters. And it was at once patent that the wrecking of that other telephone box had been a blessing in disguise, for an impatient subscriber, failing to get any connexion therewith, had dialled 'O' for official assistance and had, perforce, to reveal his own number in the process.

'Shall we get telecommunications to switch him through here and take any message or . . .'

'No, no, no. What's his address?' barked Higgins, with testy impatience. 'And don't tell me it's another blasted call box because . . . Yes, yes. All right. Hold it. I'll write it down.'

In a matter of seconds Inspector Higgins was running once more towards the waiting police car. 'Harlbury High Street,' he ordered as he clawed his way in.

'Er—yessir,' responded the driver, a shade dubiously.

'Don't worry,' said Higgins. 'I know you're supposed to be on patrol hereabouts—but *I'll* carry the can back.'

It was a fifteen-minute drive and *that* was very good going—traffic was thin, lights were kind and pedestrians agile. Even so, fifteen minutes seemed a long time for an impatient subscriber to wait for an elusive connexion; the only consolation was the fact that the subscriber was using a private line.

Harlbury at last; then the High Street. Higgins kept an eye on the numbers. 'It's this side of the road, anyhow,' he observed. Then: 'Here we are.' The car drew to a halt, and the inspector alighted. A shop of sorts, obviously.

Tobacconist, Confectioner & Newsagent, in neat lettering on the lintel over the pair of shop windows with an open door between. Well, well!

Higgins marched in—and sighed. Beyond the counters, at the end of the shop, was another confounded call box, albeit on private premises. Behind the tobacco counter a middle-aged man in a lounge suit, eager to serve.

'Who's been phoning from here?' demanded Higgins.

'What's that to you? It's for the use of the public, if they want it. Helps trade. People can't very well come in to use it without buying . . .'

Higgins flashed his warrant-card. 'Cut the cackle,' he said. 'This is a police matter. Somebody was using your phone within the last half hour. Who was it?'

'Just a casual customer. I'd never seen him before. I

'Did he buy anything?'

'I can't quite see . . .'

'Look here. There's no sign outside that there's a public telephone box in here. That means that the feller must have known you'd got one. From which it follows . . .'

'Oh, I see what you mean. He came in for some fags. Then sort of spotted the phone box and went in. He was there for quite a time, too. Bit peeved when he came out. As though he'd . . .'

'Describe him.'

'Well . . . Big chap. Thirtyish. We'll dressed. Clean-shaven. Hairy hands . . .'

'Then he was not wearing gloves. How did he pay for his cigarettes?'

'Why, with a pound note. Here! I hope it's all right.' The man turned, rang up NO SALE on the till and hastily pulled out a pound note, which he immediately held up to the light.

'Hey! Don't handle it too much. Give it to me.'

'But I . . .'

'H ll! I'll give you another for it. Careful, now.'

With fastidious forefinger and thumb Higgins took the note and eased it into a sweet bag he took from the opposite counter. 'Thanks,' he said. 'And don't let anyone else use that instrument till we've gone over it for prints.'

'Too late. Sorry. Used it myself after he'd gone. I wasn't to know . . .'

'All right. Pity, though. A treasury note isn't the best medium for retaining prints. Still . . . Which way did he go?'

The proprietor jerked a thumb. 'Up street, I think. I know his car was facing that way . . .'

'Car? What make?' Higgins stared at the man. 'Not an Ocelot, by any chance?'

'It's no use asking *me*,' replied the man, shrugging his shoulders. 'One car's the same as another, so far as I'm concerned. I'm just not interested in 'em. Black and shiny and new—that's all I can tell you.'

'I see. Thanks. Well. Here's that quid. I may be back with some photos to show you.'

Inspector Higgins nodded adieu and left the shop. He was on the point of re-entering the police car when he paused, one foot on the running-board and stared unbelievably at a figure walking along on the other side of the road. Then he let out a bellow.

'Hey, Brownall. What the heck do you think *you're* up to?'

Sergeant Brownall looked over—then hastily crossed the road.

Chapter Seven

APPREHENSION

'I THOUGHT you were half dead in Portland Hospital,' blared Inspector Higgins, in a very accusative tone of voice.

'I—I discharged myself this morning, sir, soon after you'd gone. They—they didn't object.'

'But—but what are you doing *here*?' and Higgins waved a large hand which seemed to indicate the whole of Harlbury.

'Why, sir. Following up that key business, as you suggested.'

'Key business?' Higgins raised his hands to high heaven. 'Key business? If you weren't still on leave, young Brownall, I'd . . .'

'The key of Langley's office, sir,' interposed the sergeant hastily. 'The—the duplicate you said someone must have made. You advised me . . .'

'Oh, *that* key.' Inspector Higgins simmered down and took a deep breath. 'And you think you can find it in Harlbury, eh?' He blew out his cheeks. 'All right, son. Spill it.'

Sergeant Brownall did so. Apparently, when the previous day he had gone back to the Rosemary Residential Club to make some more inquiries, he had asked to see once more the cardboard carton in which Oakfield was supposed to have found that revolver and in which Langley was supposed to have dumped the oddments his predecessor had left in his desk. His main idea had been to get some sort of line on Cockell, the previous secretary of the club. For it was Cockell whom the inspector had suggested might have had a duplicate key made. Cockell's current address was not known and the club had no record of any prior address before he became its secretary. The fishing among the oddments he had left behind was in the nature of a last resource. And, amongst the oddments, the sergeant had found three references to Harlbury: a bus ticket punched at the Harlbury Tavern, a

programme of all-in wrestling at the Harlbury Stadium and a race-card with a runner named Harlbury deeply underscored. The inference of the last named being that Cockell had indulged in a little mug-punting—not on the merits of the animal but on its name. From which it followed that the name meant something to Mr Cockell.

‘Yeah!’ commented Higgins in a disillusioned tone of voice. ‘There’s a spavined son-of-a-bitch named Detective Inspector that owes me pounds and pounds. But do you mean to say that’s all you’ve got?’

‘Well, no, sir. Not exactly. On the back of that programme somebody has written half an address. 13, Newton Court, to be exact.’

Inspector Higgins sniffed. ‘And I suppose you think that Cockell wrote his own address there in case he forgot it or something?’ he inquired sarcastically. ‘Somewhere to send the pieces, I suppose, if one of the wrestlers went hay-wire and . . .’ he broke off. ‘Still, you’ve got to start somewhere, haven’t you?’ he went on—more conciliatory in tone. ‘And is there a Newton Court hereabouts?’

‘There is, sir. At the end of the High Street. I’ve inquired.’

‘H’m! And what’s your programme now? To go along to the place and ask ’em if they’ve ever heard of a bloke called Cockell? You won’t get very far if he’s been calling himself Catfish or summat, *will* you?’

‘I have a photograph, sir,’ said the sergeant—with large dignity—and produced it from his pocket.

It was a glossy clean-cut professional piece of work, which Brownall explained had been taken at the last annual dinner of the Rosemary Club. Mr Cockell himself was in the forefront; other figures Brownall identified as Mr Quenlock, the odious Oakfield, his snooker pal Unwin and the doorkeeper-toastmaster *pro tem*. Higgins himself recognized Mr Fanworth in the background, characteristically studying his wrist-watch, but knew none of the others.

‘Just a minute,’ he said—and returned to the shop.

The proprietor shook his head after a long scrutiny of the photograph. No. His recent customer was not among those present. The inspector hadn’t expected he would have been

but it was worth trying. No use overlooking any bets. He nodded brief thanks, and left the shop.

'All right, Brownall,' he said briskly. 'Consider your leave cancelled. We'll tackle this together.' Then he leaned forward and handed into the police car the pound note in the sweet bag and gave some definite instructions; he also gave some descriptions. The car drew away.

Inspector Higgins and Sergeant Brownall traversed the length of Harlbury High Street; then beyond into where it merged into a street of an entirely different name. Two or three intersecting streets but no Newton Court. The inspector was beginning to show obvious signs of wear and tear; Brownall's expressive face became puckered with anxiety, as he mentally rehearsed his apologia. After all, it wasn't exactly a hunch this time—but more in the nature of a reasonable deduction . . . from, mayhap, insufficient data. Old Higgy *must* have thought the same else he wouldn't have come along. Nobody asked him to and . . . The sergeant emitted a large sigh of relief.

'Here we are, sir,' he announced brightly—as the name plate of the next side street came into view.

'So I see,' growled Higgins. 'But don't let's be in too much of a hurry.'

The pair halted at the end of the street. And Newton Court seemed strangely reminiscent of Collier Close. In too, was a cul-de-sac. A short block of terrace houses on each side, with a grimy building at the end, whose studded door and arched windows of coloured glass were suggestive of some sectarian place of worship.

Inspector Higgins started to count doors. Six one side and six the other. Numbers (odd) one to eleven on the left; even numbers two to twelve on the right. Number thirteen seemingly did not exist. Most unlucky! He turned to survey the sergeant with jaundiced eye. 'Turned out nice again, ain't it?' he observed sepulchrally.

Brownall blinked. 'Perhaps, sir, that—that chapel place at the end *might* be number thirteen. I— I mean, if it's now used for some—some secular purpose, they'd give it a number and . . .'

'H'm! Let's have a look.'

Even as they walked towards the studded door a column of black smoke shot up behind the building.

'G-golly, sir. The place is afire,' gasped Brownall.

Higgins sniffed. 'Don't talk daft, man. That's a train. The line must run behind the place, I expect.' As though in confirmation there was a shrill whistle and the column of smoke began to move; there was a series of gigantic puffs and then the black cloud started to drift away.

The inspector halted before a weather-beaten notice board attached to the wall of the building. So far as he could decipher from the once gold lettering, almost obliterated by grime, the place was the Hall of the Clear Thinkers, that it was used for meetings every Monday and that the Leader presumably preferred anonymity, for his name had been deleted by a thick daub of black paint. Then, at the foot of the notice board: Terms For Hire. Apply Caretaker. Under this was a painted hand with the forefinger pointing left. And this obviously referred to a once green wooden door, topped with spikes, which divided the side of the hall from the end wall of No. 11. Faintly discernible thereon was a crudely painted number: 13.

Higgins surveyed the door. Having got so far they might as well go the rest of the way. On the right hand jamb of the door was a chipped enamel plaque: Pull. Beneath this was a hole, filled with cobwebby dust, where the bell had once been. Higgins blew out his cheeks in sheer frustration. Then, with rising choler, he kicked savagely at the door, which promptly swung open and banged against the wall of the hall.

Beyond was a triangular yard enclosed by the end wall of No. 11, the side wall of the hall and a low protective parapet with the railway lines behind it. And the yard was littered with pieces of packing-cases, sodden cartons, sacking, bits and pieces of rope and bent nails and junk generally, all liberally filmed with soot from the railway alongside. Somebody had chopped a heap of firewood—recently, too, for the pieces stood out clearly against the general murk.

Higgins passed through the gate and at once saw a side door in the wall of the hall. This, too, had once been painted green but most of the paint had peeled off. Numerous scratches round an out-sized keyhole suggested unsteady

hands or lack of light when making ingress. And an out-sized keyhole . . . Well . . .

The inspector leaned forward to get a pre-view of the inside—but the moment his fingertips touched the door it eased open an inch. So this, too, was not locked.

He straightened upright. Sergeant Brownall coughed deprecatingly. The inspector sniffed. 'If householders leave their doors undone,' he observed in a biting undertone, 'we, as officers of the law, are entitled to point it out and . . .'

'But this isn't a house, sir,' responded Brownall, with rather pedantic diffidence.

Higgins took a deep breath of exasperation, pushed open the door and stalked in. Sergeant Brownall, after a momentary pause, followed—a shade unhappily.

There was a short passage, with a door on the right and bare stairs leading upwards.

'Anybody at home?' called Higgins, standing at the foot of the stairs.

There being no reply he knocked perfunctorily on the panel of the door and pushed it open. This apparently led to the hall proper; such light as filtered through the grime of the coloured windows gave the room an eerie aspect. Although the body of the hall was completely bare, there was a platform at the farther end, with table and chairs. Behind the table was another door.

The floor was littered with cigarette ends. Higgins nodded grimly to himself. Smoking was undoubtedly an aid to clear thinking. Then he crossed the floor to the platform and climbed up. On the table was a much thumbed pack of cards, which he picked up and fanned through his fingers. Suddenly he chuckled and looked down at the waiting sergeant. 'Somebody had a clear thought here, sarge,' he observed, grinning widely. 'I'd like to play him with these and see how we both got on.'

'Marked, sir?'

Higgins nodded. 'Antiquated system, though. I wonder who . . .' He broke off and stared up at the ceiling. From somewhere above had come a faint puling cry. 'Strewth! There's a kid up there, son,' he said—and jumped hurriedly from the platform.

Sergeant Brownall looked worried. 'D-don't you think, sir, we—er—ought to . . .'

'Quite, son. I do,' said Higgins, without waiting for the sergeant to finish. 'It's—um—high time we—er—legalized our position.'

Once more he stood at the foot of those stairs and called upwards. Again there was no reply. He stood for a moment in indecision and then mounted the stairs.

The cry, considerably louder now but still of no great volume, seemed to come from behind the door of the room up above. Higgins knocked on the panel, waited a moment, shrugged his shoulders, then turned the handle of the door.

A magnificent Siamese cat emerged, gazing inquiringly upwards with pale blue eyes and then started to rub herself on the inspector's toe-caps in an ecstasy of welcome.

'Well, blow me down,' said Higgins.

He stooped, picked up the cat in his large hand and, as she started to knead his ample chest with dainty paws, purring with enthusiasm, he carefully inspected the narrow collar round her neck. 'Beauty of Bangkok' he read aloud and glanced, with one upraised eyebrow, at Sergeant Brownall.

'Golly, sir. Isn't that the cat there was all that fuss about?'

Higgins nodded.

The purring suddenly ceased, the cat's ears cocked backwards; there was a distant rumble and the walls of the room seemed to vibrate. Then, with a crescendo of sound, a train below hurtled past, and with the shriek of its whistle, the cat leapt from the inspector's arms, jumped to the top of a table and from thence to an open trap-door in the ceiling. There was a scampering of feet overhead, then complete silence.

Inspector Higgins stared upwards at the open trap-door. Much as he liked cats, he was not prepared to risk life and limb clambering over the joists above in the forlorn hope of recapturing even such a notorious animal as the Beauty of Bangkok, who seemed well able to look after herself. He would lay six to four that there was but a film of lath and plaster between the joists—and to the floor of the hall below would be a substantial drop. Still, it was something to know where she had been hiding herself . . . though why the deuce someone should deliberately leave open a trap-door . . .

At the thought the inspector stood quite still for a bare second; then he climbed on to the top of the table, produced his flash-lamp from his pocket and gingerly straightened upright. With fingertips on the lip of the opening to preserve his balance, he stretched on tiptoe until his eyes were on the level of the rim. Then he pressed the button of his torch.

A white, startled face, some four feet away, blinked in the ray.

'Good afternoon,' said Higgins brightly. 'You've got visitors. Better come down now, hadn't you?'

'But—but I warn't expectin' you today.' The man's voice was hoarse with fear.

'Too bad. Come down and tell us all about it. Or would you rather I . . . me up and . . .'

'I'm acomin', mister,' the man replied with haste.

Inspector Higgins released the button of his torch and jumped from the table. Through the open trap-door a pair of legs appeared; the man wriggled through the opening and carefully lowered himself to the table top. Then as carefully eased himself to the floor, and stood there blinking affrightedly up into the inspector's face.

'Who are you?' demanded Higgins.

'I—I'm Anderson. Caretaker here.'

'H'm! And what were you doing up there?' with an upward jerk of the head.

'I—I don't like all you people comin' here as if you owned the place,' whined the man. 'I—I wanted to keep outa the way like.'

'H'm! Did you indeed! I should have thought it simpler to call in the police and have trespassers chucked out.' Higgins thoughtfully scratched his head with a fingernail.

'I—I dassn't do that. I—I'm a sorta trespasser meself.' And even as he made the admission the man clapped a hand to his mouth as though to recall it.

'Like that, eh?' Inspector Higgins raised one eyebrow and stared intently at the man, who appeared both half-witted and harmless. There was a catch somewhere and . . . Of course! 'I see. I—um—I suppose you're a sort of squatter here. Is that it?'

'W-well. Not reely, mister. You see . . .'

explanation was comparatively simple. Anderson had been the caretaker of the place during the régime of the Clear Thinkers, which had flourished for a season and then folded up when its leading light, and owner of the place, found his followers reduced to one—Mr Anderson himself. The leader had simply vanished and Anderson had stayed on, living rent free and eking out an existence by hawking firewood and doing occasional odd jobs . . . a meagre but not unhappy mode of life which had lasted for years. Then one night he had burglars . . .

‘Eh? What’s that? I shouldn’t have thought there was much here to pinch.’

But Higgins was wrong. The price of lead being such as it was, somebody had deemed it a pity for the lead in the roofing of the hall to be running to waste—and had broken in . . . obviously expecting the place to be unoccupied. The sudden appearance of Anderson had turned the venture into a stampede. But Anderson, feeling his own position in the place a little uncertain and obscure, had failed to notify the incident to the police. And that started the trouble. His overnight visitors had quickly guessed there must be some reason for this . . . and since then Anderson had been more or less at their beck and call.

Inspector Higgins pursed his lips and shook his head in wonderment.

‘But why the heck didn’t you lock ’em out or something?’ he inquired.

‘They—they took my key, mister. That—that’s why *you* was able to get in.’

Higgins snorted. ‘Dammit! You could have changed the lock, couldn’t you? As the last of the Clear Thinkers you’re a bit of a washout, aren’t you?’

‘Well, mister. I told you as how . . .’ It was the same insuperable difficulty as before—the fact that Anderson had no real right to be there. ‘And—and I haven’t seed any of ’em for weeks. I—I rather hoped they’d give me up like.’

It was all rather pathetic. The inspector sighed. ‘All right, Anderson. Now tell me about your cat.’

And the man’s face lit up; his spontaneous smile gave some

semblance of character to an otherwise expressionless face. 'Ain't she a beauty, sir,' he said—with naïve enthusiasm.

'M'yes. Beauty of Bangkok, to be precise.'

The marr frowned his complete lack of comprehension. 'I don't get it, mister,' he said.

'The name on the collar, man,' explained Higgins—with gruff impatience.

'Is that what it says? I—I knew it was something, you see. But—but I can't read.'

Chapter Eight

ESCAPE

INSPECTOR HIGGINS sat at the desk in his cubby-hole, smoking his pipe, whilst a colleague put him *au fait* with the latest developments of the Costerley Grange business. And developments was something of a misnomer, for, despite much activity at the time, the current phase was one of masterly inactivity, waiting for some of the loot to turn up. His colleague had expressed himself as being sick and tired of the whole caboodle.

It had happened six weeks previously. Costerley Grange, though near London, is in a rather isolated position and is surrounded by a tall brick wall, topped with broken glass. Mrs Egmont, the owner, lived there alone—save for a couple of middle-aged servants, both conveniently deaf. At night the grounds—barely an acre in extent—were patrolled by a large nondescript mongrel of no great ferocity but of remarkable lung-power, which bayed at the moon when visible and would have been a nuisance to neighbours had there been any.

And one morning the brute failed to be waiting for his meal at the first sign of movement in the household—a procedure so unusual that Mrs Egmont couldn't really believe it. And when it did not respond to a vigorous tapping of a spoon on a plate—an infallible tocsin as a rule—she knew there must be something seriously wrong.

There was. She found the dog fast asleep at the foot of the high wall near the roadway. Being a veterinary surgeon she soon came to the conclusion that the beast had been drugged. A glance at the top of the wall showed a hiatus in the line of broken glass. Further deduction was almost superfluous. She'd had burglars during the night. Moreover, having climbed the wall, the intruders had somehow managed to open the main gates for a quick getaway . . . and had left them open. Which might well mean . . . And Mrs

Egmont had hurried back to the house. Her worst fears were justified!

One of the more venturesome of her precious cats had seized this heaven-sent opportunity to see a little more of the outer world which hitherto had been confined to travelling baskets and the even more stuffy atmosphere of the show cage.

Mrs Egmont had promptly notified the local police who in due course had sent a constable along to see what all the fuss was about. By the time he arrived on his bicycle at Costerley Grange the good lady had made the further discovery that her not inconsiderable jewels had gone as well. When this was reported back by the constable, the local police began to show a little more enthusiasm, which eventually blossomed into calling in expert assistance from the Yard.

'But believe me, Higgy,' said the colleague, 'that old battle-axe was more concerned over the loss of her bee-yutiful Babsy than the hatful of gewgaws she'd lost at the same time. It took me ages to get out of her particulars of the jewellery. But as to the blasted cat . . . Well, if she described it once she described it . . .'

'I think we can set her mind at rest over that,' interrupted Higgins. 'The Beauty of Bangkok is at Harlbury.'

'Harlbury? That's a heck of a long way from Costerley. How come?'

Inspector Higgins shrugged. 'At a guess it came by car.'

'Car? Well, the thieves certainly used a car. But you don't mean to tell me that, once they got the loot, they lumbered themselves up with a cat as well, do you? They'd never be able to sell the dam' thing—any reputable breeder would know it was hot—and . . .'

'No, old man. Another guess is that it parked itself in the car unbidden and didn't escape till the car reached Harlbury.'

'And the thieves did nothing about it?' incredulously.

'I doubt if they even knew they'd an extra passenger.'

'H'm! Could be, I suppose. Cats are notoriously inquisitive. And the brute was probably used to cars, in any case. But what now? Where do we go from here? I know one thing: when she gets her bee-yutiful Babsy back Mrs Egmont'll cough up a handsome donation to the Police Orphanage Fund—and probably kiss the bearer into the bargain.' The

officer chuckled. 'We ought to send young Brownall.'

Inspector Higgins shook his head. 'Not yet,' he said. 'I don't want too much activity round Newton Court, where the cat is now, because the gang may use the place again and I don't want to frighten 'em off. Brownall and I might have been noticed when we were there this afternoon but, if so, that's just too bad. But I'm hoping we weren't. They don't use the place in daylight. If and when they come agen, we'll be waiting for 'em.'

'I see,' responded the officer. 'More masterly inactivity, eh?'

Higgins smiled and nodded. 'Sorry, old man.'

When his colleague had left, the inspector picked up his copy of the *Evening Sentinel*. It must have been the silly season or something—or the editor was woefully short of copy . . . but that free-lance reporter had certainly done himself proud in his coverage of the explosion in Blacksmith Lane. He wanted to know who could possibly be responsible for this dastardly outrage on an inoffensive call box. Was it a disgruntled citizen in protest against repeated wrong numbers? Or maybe a person with a grudge against a supercilious counter clerk in the Post Office? And how was it done? A bomb, timed to go off at eleven-thirty precisely? Or perhaps an infernal machine primed to explode the moment the bell rang. Did the conspirator adjust his contrivance and then hasten to another instrument, dial POR 8561—and listen for the bang? Or was it perhaps a home-made firework which had proved to be an even bigger success than its inventor had anticipated . . .

The inspector frowned as he dropped the paper into his W.P.B. The telephone number of that kiosk had been most effectively broadcast after all. *That* seemed to be the main outcome of all this wordy facetiousness . . .

His intercom buzzed and he picked up the instrument.

'That pound note you sent along, sir,' said a voice. 'There's an unmistakable thumb-print of Tough Tatham on it. We were lucky, really, for Tatham must have had some oil on his thumb when he handled the note. Shall I send up his file?'

'No thanks. I know all about Tough Tatham. But you might send his photograph along to that tobacconist in Harlbury High Street—just for confirmation. The description

he gave certainly tallies with Tatham, but we may as well make sure. Anything else?’

‘That pack of playing cards, sir. You knew they were marked?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Higgins smiled wearily. Trying to teach granny to suck eggs, seemingly.

‘Well, sir, they’ve almost been used *too* much—but we may be able to segregate one or two prints, though I’m none too sanguine.’

‘All right. Let me know if you do.’

‘Of *course*, sir.’

Inspector Higgins replaced the instrument on its hook. Tough Tatham, eh? A slick operator if ever there was one! Been jugged but the once—but suspected often enough since. Careful cuss, it was a cinch he would have been wearing gloves when he handled that note if he had the slightest conception that it might have mattered. And oil on his thumb . . . Oil . . .

The inspector leaned back in his seat. For some reason or other he had suddenly thought of the spots of oil he had seen on the concrete surface of that tiny courtyard at the rear of the Rosemary Residential Club . . . And the car he had momentarily glimpsed backing out of the place. An Ocelot, for sure. Perhaps *the* Ocelot for which radio inquiries had been made at twelve-fifty this morning.

Had the car returned to the courtyard whilst Mr Fanworsh had been giving his homily on clocks? And if so, why the spots of oil? It was a *new* car. There was hardly likely to be a leak in the sump. Or a loose screw through which oil might escape. Oil rather suggested the removal of a squeak . . . or the casement of a fitting . . . Or . . . Jerusalem! Was oil used to expedite removal of the number plates? That *might* be it. With a new car the bolts would certainly not be rusted in . . . And it wouldn’t take very long to effect an exchange into fakes. H’m! It might well explain why the car seemed to have vanished into thin air, despite the two-hour delay before the radio call was made.

Higgins lifted his intercommunicating telephone again, pressed the requisite button and placed his pipe on his ashtray. ‘What’s the latest about that Ocelot?’ he asked.

'Not traced yet, sir. But we're checking up car registrations. Of the possible nine hundred and ninety-nine numbers in the X C V category, there are a hundred and fifteen Ocelots, of which twenty-five are blue-black. These are being looked into.'

'H'm! None reported stolen, I suppose?'

'No, sir. We're beginning to wonder whether the X C V part of it is right.'

'Where did it come from in the first place?'

'The wage clerk, sir. He was knocked silly with a cosh, and rushed to hospital. It was a couple of hours before we could get anything like a coherent statement out of him. By that time, of course . . .'

'Yes, yes. I wondered why we were so slow off the mark.'

'Couldn't be helped, sir. It was all over in a flash. The clerk had just noticed a new Ocelot parked in front of his own van, when he was clubbed from behind. He was quite certain about the X C V, though. And the car was certainly gone by the time we . . .'

'Was the clerk on his own, then?'

'Apparently, sir.'

Higgins sniffed . . . and refrained from comment. 'All right, son,' he said at last. 'Keep me posted. I'm rather interested in that Ocelot.'

Which you'll never find, he reflected, as he replaced the instrument on its rest. For he had just realized that, if the number plates *had* been changed, it might well be that the car now sported its real registration numbers, fake numbers having been used during the snatch operations. A reversal of the usual technique. And the reason for the thought was the fact that no report had yet come in of the theft of a new Ocelot. And to check up on all the owners of blue-black Ocelots, of whatever registration, would take from now till Doomsday! Blue-black Ocelots were two a penny, metaphorically—despite the price.

There was a knock at his door and a constable entered.

'I was asked to give you this, sir,' he said. 'You left it in the patrol car this afternoon.' And he handed to the inspector a somewhat battered trilby hat.

'Oh, ah, yes. Thanks very much.'

The constable withdrew and Higgins stared at the hat. To be quite honest, he had completely forgotten all about it. He had, of course, already given a comprehensive description of the man—right down to his probable black eye—and with the added information, following his prowess in Collier Close, that the man might be a professional boxer . . . but this hat might well reveal his fingerprints as well as other vital data which the back-room boys might dig up . . .

Higgins turned over the hat to glance at the lining—as though expecting to find the man's name and address inside. H'm! Made by Model Hats. Branches at Wembley, Harrow, Croydon and—and Harlbury.

The inspector emitted a tuneless whistle. Within half a minute the hat was in the hands of the experts of the fingerprint department. The thought lingered that, even if they discovered the man's identity through Records, there was nothing they could charge him with—save perhaps the technical assault on that girl . . .

Jerusalem! That girl. That was another chore he had somehow overlooked.

His telephone bell rang. Higgins lifted the instrument.

'Inspector Higgins?' asked a feminine voice. And Higgins blinked. It was the girl herself. What a slice o' luck.

'Yes, Miss Langley,' he said heartily.

'Ssh! You mustn't call me that here. I'm ringing from the club. You told me to let you know if I was all right.'

'M'yes. But I rather meant when you got home.'

'But there isn't a phone at the youth hostel. And there is one here.'

Higgins sighed and raised his eyes to his pock-marked ceiling.

'I—er—see, missie. And have you anything to report?'

'No. I've been too busy. We're short-handed. One of the kitchen staff didn't come back after lunch.'

'Was his name Kenton, by any chance?' asked Higgins.

'Inspector, you're wonderful. How *could* you know?'

'J—um—guessed, missie,' dryly.

'They're all talking about it. Apparently people are always doing that here. I mean just living—without saying a word to anybody. They say that the previous secretary—you know—the one before m-my brother . . . *He*

left just the same. It's sort of catching, isn't it? I mean . . .'

'Just a moment, missie,' interrupted Higgins. 'You say that the previous secretary just skedaddled without a word?'

'So *they* say. The staff, I mean. Unless, of course, he was sacked. They wouldn't know that.'

H'm! Anything else happened?' asked Higgins, in a bewildered tone of voice.

'Oh, nothing.' Then Miss Langley chuckled. 'Except that the chef nearly had a fit when the hot water turned green. The plumbers . . .'

'Hold it, miss. Green, you say? Was it billiards chalk, by any chance?'

'I wouldn't know. It's all right now. The plumbers cleaned the cistern and . . .'

'Damn!' The expletive was involuntary as Higgins digested the implication.

'Inspector!' The girl chuckled in mock reproof.

'Sorry, miss. And is that all?' in weary unbelief.

'Yes. I'm rather enjoying it, really.'

'Good. Well, I'll send along a nice young handsome detective to see you home.'

'You needn't bother. I've already—ah—arranged for that,' archly.

'Fine. Who's the lucky man?'

'That would be telling.' Miss Langley's lilting laugh suddenly merged into the dialling tone as she replaced the receiver.

Inspector Higgins reached for his hat, picked up Sergeant Brownall on the way down and within seconds was in his car on the way to the Rosemary Residential Club. Traffic, unfortunately, was heavy and Higgins had to concentrate on his driving.

'Perhaps she'll be gone when we get there,' ventured Brownall at last, breaking the long silence.

Higgins snorted. 'Need you make footling remarks?' he barked. 'What the hell d'you think I'm hurrying for? I'm just assuming she hadn't changed for the street when she rang me up.. And if she doesn't come out within five minutes of our getting there, I'm going inside to take the place apart.

All I've asked you to come along for is to vet the bloke she comes out with . . . *if* she does.'

'Er—yessir. But I should only know them as club members. I mean I couldn't vouch for their . . .'

'Dammit! You know your pal Oakfield, for one. *I've* only got that dinner photo to go on. That crack on the bonse you got when trailing him seems to have . . .'

'Sorry, sir,' said Brownall hastily, and lapsed into uneasy silence.

Higgins snorted again—more fiercely than before—and neatly overtook the car ahead.

Rosemary Street was reached in record time. Higgins turned the corner and halted the car at the kerb. 'Five minutes,' he growled as he lowered at the main entrance of the Rosemary Club some thirty yards in front. 'And not a fraction of a second . . .'

He broke off. A dark coloured Ocelot pulled out of the traffic coming towards them and drew to a halt before the steps of the club. The door of the car opened, a slightly built man emerged. Even as he did so, Miss Langley, in far from funereal garb, ran lightly down the steps. The slim gentleman promptly raised his hat, shot his cuff to glance at his watch and nodded approvingly. And Inspector Higgins gasped.

'Jerusalem!' he muttered.

Chapter Nine

CHASE

INSPECTOR HIGGINS cursed fulsomely as he tried to essay a U turn in the rather congested Rosemary Street; the oncoming traffic was more than inconsiderate—it was downright hoggish. No driver seemed prepared to give way; he had to wait for a break in the stream. Meanwhile, behind him, the blocked cars were expressing impatience with derisive klaxons. At last he managed to make it, squeezing into an almost impossible gap and enduring shouted imprecations from all and sundry.

‘Did you get the number of that blasted car?’ he growled out of the side of his mouth.

‘Yessir. And it wasn’t the X C V they . . .’

‘Hell! I know that. Can you see it ahead? ‘Cos *I* can’t,’ said Higgins, irritably, as he edged to the centre of the road to peer ahead. ‘Of all the confounded luck—to be facing the wrong way . . .’ He relaxed and blew out his cheeks as he at last caught sight of the Ocelot in front. Then, after a period of silence: ‘I’d like to know what the heck *she* thinks she’s up to?’ he inquired—of the world at large.

‘Who was the man, sir?’ asked Brownall, feeling somewhat bewildered by the turn of events.

‘Fanworth. The clock gentleman,’ responded Higgins, his head half out of the off window in his effort to keep the car in sight.

‘And is he . . .?’

‘He *is*,’ gruffly. Higgins sniffed. ‘At least, I *think* he is,’ he added—without specifying precisely what he meant. ‘Of course, all this *would* happen with the theatre crowds on the move. It must be one o’ those days.’

A red traffic light halted the stream of cars and Higgins fumed at the delay—well aware that Fanworth had just slipped through on the amber; the only consolation was that he knew which direction Fanworth had taken . . . straight

ahead. But, as it happened, the traffic thinned considerably when the light turned again—most of the cars in front turning left—and the inspector soon made up the lost distance. In fact he was soon almost on the tail of the Ocelot and began to wonder whether or not he was a shade too near. One thing, though, Fanworth did not seem to be in any real hurry. Higgins nodded his head grimly. Wouldn't do for the man to be stopped for speeding or anything at this stage.

The Ocelot turned right at the next road junction; Higgins followed a few seconds later. The theatres and shops had now been left behind: this street was purely residential and the lighting more subdued. The inspector promptly reduced his speed until the Ocelot was a more reasonable distance in front; he could easily close the gap if and when the situation called for it.

And thereafter the trailing was easy. It seemed patent to Higgins that Fanworth had not the remotest idea there was another car on his tail; he was careful of his speed and punctilious with his automatic indicators whenever he turned a corner. As a car-chase through the heart of London it was something of a flop. The inspector was beginning to feel a little uneasy in his mind.

Then, half-way along a long quiet street the car ahead slowed, crawled along the kerb for a few yards and then halted before a tall building with a lighted globe, pendant from the roof of the front porch.

Higgins promptly pulled up and extinguished his lights.

'What's painted on that globe, sarge?' he asked. 'Your eyes are younger than mine.'

Sergeant Brownall leaned forward to peer through the windscreen.

Mr Fanworth had already alighted from his car and was gallantly opening the near door for Miss Langley to emerge.

'Can't quite make it out, sir,' said Brownall. 'Looks like "Youth" something or other. With "Ladies" something underneath. Can't see all of it. If you pull a bit nearer . . .'

'Well, blow me down,' said Higgins, in a very disgusted tone of voice. 'Six to four it's "Youth Hostel, Ladies' Entrance"'. And here have I been sweating blood . . .'

He broke off and sighed heavily.

Miss Langley was now at the door beneath the lighted globe. She waved a friendly hand to Mr Fanworth, who promptly raised his hat, glanced at his wrist-watch and climbed back into the car.

The Ocelot was out of sight before Inspector Higgins recovered sufficiently to turn in his seat to eye the sergeant's profile. 'Can you beat it?' he muttered.

'You expected trouble, sir?'—a most injudicious inquiry.

'Oh, no!' responded Higgins heavily. 'It's just that I *like* driving.' Savagely he switched on his lights again. 'Any more cracks?' he asked, as he let in his clutch.

'Er—no, sir. But if this Fanworth is up to any funny business, he does at least know where the girl lives.'

Higgins jammed on his brakes.

'You know, sarge,' he said, as he stared up at the lighted globe and confirmed his suspicions as to what was painted thereon, 'sometimes when you open your mouth you say something.'

As Brownall digested this rather left-handed compliment, the inspector pondered the sergeant's remark. Fanworth did now undoubtedly know the girl's address—she might even have told him where she lived before he took her there in his car. Then why go to such lengths? Merely to prove she was telling the truth? Perhaps. Yet, if anything should happen to the girl afterwards, someone—the doorkeeper, for instance—would assuredly remember that Fanworth had once driven her home in his car. A double bluff, maybe? 'If I had wished any harm to the girl I would have done it then' sort of business. But, if the inspector's guess were correct, and Fanworth was in this business (whatever it was) up to his neck, it was a cinch he was an entrepreneur rather than an executant. He would leave any real skulduggery for others to do—and keep his own skirts clean. Or was the car ride the thin of the wedge to get himself into the girl's confidence? The inspector shook his head from side to side. Dammit! The girl was already half hooked. To her, Mr Fanworth was 'very nice' . . . and she would hardly have accepted a lift in his car if she had thought otherwise. And it was *he* who had given her those precise directions to Collier Close. Was it also he who had instructed Trilby Hat to follow her and see

what she was up to? Could be, of course. Perhaps that was even why he had been so helpful with his directions.

'I rather think, son,' said Higgins at last, 'that you had better go ah' have another interview with the lady before she retires for the night. I should like to know whether or not she has spilled any beans to her nice Mr Fanworth. And—who knows?—she may even inspire you to another of your famous hunches.'

'But, sir'—and the sergeant's voice sounded full of reproach—'I *did* explain to you that I was quite convinced that suicide verdict was wrong before I'd even *seen* the lady.'

'Yeah! Yeah! I know. But you forgot to mention that you *had* seen her. No matter, son. On your way. And don't be too long or I'll begin to think things.' And the inspector emitted a deep mephistophelean chuckle so full of meaning that Sergeant Brownall blushed in the darkness and hastily clambered from the car.

Higgins grinned as he watched the sergeant halt beneath the lighted globe and push open the door, revealing the hall beyond; a buxom matron bustled towards him. The door was gently closed.

Inspector Higgins leaned back in his seat, well content to snatch forty winks. And why not? What was the use of keeping a dog and barking yourself? It was a cinch that young Brownall would get more out of the girl than he would himself. The sergeant was not, in the girl's estimation, a disbelieving stinker. She had said so!

Then he leaned forward to adjust the hinged shade in the roof of the car in an effort to shield his eyes from the blinding headlights of an oncoming car. It was not until the car was almost on him that he realized it was an Ocelot . . . a moment later that it was Fanworth's . . . Then—an immediate and almost involuntary reaction—he slid down on his seat, not so much to remain unseen but in an instinctive effort to reduce his enormous bulk, and cringed against an expected . . . expected what? The car flashed by. The crouching Higgins peered up into the driving mirror above the wind-screen and watched the diminishing rear tail-light of the Ocelot until it was out of sight.

Slowly he eased himself upright, ran a large forefinger

round the rim of his collar and blew out his cheeks. Jerusalem! If he wasn't careful, one of these days he'd frighten himself to death. He was getting a proper old woman. He grinned ruefully in the darkness. Bit o' luck young Brownall hadn't been alongside.

Presumably Mr Fanworth had merely gone to the end of the road in order to turn around; the street *was* rather narrow just here—and to turn without backing once or twice would be almost impossible with an Ocelot. Well, well, well. Whad'yer know!

Inspector Higgins shook his head in self-derision, and pulled out his pipe. He'd give the proposed forty winks the go-by.

.

'The matron was a bit of a dragon, sir,' said Sergeant Brownall as he poked his head through the near window—and Higgins awoke with a start. He picked up his pipe from his lap, hastily brushed some fronds of tobacco from his waistcoat and generally pulled himself together.

'Thundering hard luck, son,' he said as he leaned over and released the catch of the door. 'Hop in and tell me all about it.'

The car drew away from the kerb; Brownall waved valedictory fingers through the window—presumably not to the matron—and carefully closed the window afterwards.

He explained that Miss Langley had been very surprised to see him as she was not aware that he even knew her temporary address. Mr Fanworth had acted in a perfectly gentlemanly manner and she rather resented the implication that he might be other than he seemed. She had not told him why she had taken the job at the Rosemary Club, though he seemed to have guessed she was rather out of her element there. He had even suggested that he might use his influence to get her a different situation if she so wished. He had asked her, in a most friendly way, whether his directions had been of help to her in finding Collier Close, but had been too much of a gentleman to inquire what her business there might have been. Then he asked her what time she came off duty.

and said he would be most happy to give her a lift home afterwards—as he did not like young girls to be out so comparatively late at night, and *did* so hope she wouldn't think him presumptuous in making such a suggestion. And in the car there had been no attempt at any—um—funny business. Mr Fanworth had just talked about things in general and, perhaps, himself in particular . . . How he always felt a little lonely away from his clocks. How he had not yet managed to regulate the clock on the dashboard with that nicety of precision he would have wished. And what a whale he was for figures.

'You're telling me,' muttered Higgins.

'Not feminine figures, sir,' said Brownall hastily. 'Perhaps I should have said numerals.'

Mr Fanworth had explained to Miss Langley how numbers always stuck in his head. He had but to see a number once and thereafter the effort would be to forget it rather than remember. His mind was cluttered with useless sets of figures. Addresses, car registrations, treasury notes, telephone numbers . . .

'Jerusalem!' Higgins remembered a telephone number scrawled at the bottom of a reporter's note-book—a number which Fanworth must have given him. 'Sorry, son. Go on.'

'He told her he could recite the number of every car he had ever had. Then he started to show off—which was a pity. He gave her a short string of numbers and told her that if she would deduct that figure from the mileage shown on the speedometer it would give the distance they had travelled since leaving the club. Miss Langley obliged and told him that in that case they must have travelled about forty-nine miles.' Brownall chuckled. 'Mr Fanworth was most disconcerted and checked it up himself. And that sort of finished the conversation. Miss Langley said she wouldn't have hurt his feelings for the world, and that if she had thought twice, she would certainly have told him he was right in the first place, instead of being rather facetious about it. And most assuredly she would never have laughed when she said it. She had the good sense, though, not to apologize. And that was that. He had been most punctilious when he had ushered her from the car—but perhaps a little distraught.'

Sergeant Brownall spread his hands. 'There you are, sir. That's what she told me—in more or less her own words.'

Inspector Higgins grunted. 'H'm! Fanworth seems to be an extraordinary combination of a bit of a bore and a fast worker, son. What was the girl's reaction?'

'She seems to have found him a bit fascinating, sir.'

The inspector chuckled. 'What's he got—besides money—that you haven't, son?' he asked.

'I don't think Miss Langley is like that, sir,' said Brownall.

Higgins said nothing. He wouldn't hurt the sergeant's feelings, either!

It was not until the inspector turned right from a familiar route that Sergeant Brownall ventured any further comment. 'Aren't we going back to the Yard, sir?' he asked.

'No, sarge. I've a yen to give the Water Rat the once-over.'

'The Water Rat, sir? Isn't that where Tough Tatham's mob hangs out?'

'Quite right, son. I want to have a few words with the gentleman.'

'On your own, sir?' The sergeant's voice sounded almost incredulous.

'No, son. I'll have you with me,' dryly.

'I know that, sir. But I meant . . .'

'Pipe down, sarge, will yer? I want to think.'

The car ran through a number of mean streets; even at this time of night there were odd groups in doorways suddenly revealed by the headlights and occasional figures scurrying along in the darkness. The inspector nodded grimly to himself as the car passed a couple of policemen on patrol—it was the sort of district which called for double harness. Then from the nearby river came the mournful blast of a tug's siren which faded into nothingness—to be immediately followed by an echo from the distance.

Higgins turned another corner and the car shuddered its way along uneven cobblestones.

Towards the end of the dark street was a solitary street lamp; beyond the lamp, light filtered through an open doorway. Above the doorway, silhouetted against the skyline, was a swinging sign, although it was impossible to discern what was depicted thereon.

'Here we are,' said Higgins brightly. 'You can wait here till I come out.'

'B-but, sir. I—er—I mean . . .'

'It's *my* car, son. I don't want it pinched. Be seein' yer.' The inspector alighted and slammed the door.

He had barely passed beneath that swinging sign when a short fat individual in an apron barred his way.

'Sorry, mate,' he said. 'It's long past closing time.'

'I know. That's why I've come at this time o' night. It's Tough Tatham I've come to see. Where is he?'

'I—I dunno as I orta . . . I mean, he never said as how he was expecting . . . What do you want him for?'

Inspector Higgins stared downwards with cold eyes at the man's fat face. 'I'll mention to Tough how anxious you are to know,' he said, nodding his head with menacing emphasis.

'Here, mister. D-don't get me wrong. I . . .'

'Take me to him. And quick.'

The inspector's authoritative tones worked the trick. The man mumbled something unintelligible and led the way along a side passage, away from the pungent aroma of stale beer and tobacco smoke. He paused before a door, gave a very distinctive knock upon the panel—which Higgins mentally filed for future reference if necessary—and turned the handle.

'A gentleman to see you, boss,' he said.

Inspector Higgins walked in. The door closed behind him.

Tough Tatham was seated at a table, seemingly engrossed in a game of patience; one hairy hand held a playing card and he was running his eyes over the columns of cards before him, looking for somewhere to place it, whilst his free hand drummed a tattoo on the table top. The card disposed of, he picked up another. Then, without even looking up, he observed in a quiet voice:

'You've got a nerve coming here, haven't you?'

'Yes, I have, haven't I?' said Higgins brightly, and seated himself on the opposite chair.

Chapter Ten

MURDER

TOUGH TATHAM suddenly scuffled the cards into an indiscriminate heap upon the table, made an inarticulate growl of apparent vexation and at last looked up.

'Well? What do you want, now that you *are* here?' he asked—and stared at the inspector with unwinking steel-grey eyes.

'To begin with I'd like to know where you were at ten-fifty this morning.'

'You would, eh? And what's the magic of ten-fifty?'

'Just that something happened then,' replied Higgins blandly. 'And I would like to know where you were at the time.'

Tough Tatham again drummed the table top with his fingers. 'I can't think why you should imagine . . . H'm! Ten-fifty.' He shrugged his shoulders; then smiled, showing white even teeth. 'If you must know, I was here—waiting for opening time.' His smile broadened. 'We're very careful of the licensing laws, as you know. And if it would help you any, I don't doubt I could produce half a dozen witnesses who . . .'

'Oh, I don't doubt that, either,' said Higgins heartily.

Tough Tatham's wide smile seemed fixed momentarily and then slowly vanished. 'I don't like the way you said that,' he observed as he leaned forward over the table to stare into the inspector's placid countenance.

'That's too bad. And you stayed here till when?'

'Till we closed,' snapped Tatham.

'Well, well, well. Then it could not possibly have been you, between half past twelve and a quarter to one today, who bought some cigarettes and used the phone of a tobacconist at Harlbury, could it?'

'Quite patently not.'

'Funny, that. The tobacconist has already identified your photograph. And if it would help to—um—jog your memory

at all, I can even tell you the telephone number you tried, and failed, to get.' Higgins raised one mocking eyebrow. 'Portland 8561.'

Tough Tatham leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, scowling ferociously at the scattered cards upon the table top, as though almost unable to believe his hearing. 'So what?' he snarled at last.

'So I would still like to know where you were at ten-fifty this morning.'

Tough Tatham took a very deep breath; then let out a bellow which almost startled Higgins from his chair.

'Fatty!'

There was a sound of scurrying feet; the aproned man, with broom at the ready, flung open the door, and stared wildly from the inspector to Tough Tatham—and seemed surprised to find the pair so peacefully seated.

'Y-yes, boss?' he inquired.

'Tell this—um—gentleman exactly where I was at opening time this morning,' said Tatham. Then, as the fat man peered inquiringly into his eyes. 'No. Don't look to me for guidance. Just tell him exactly where I was. The truth, mind you.'

'Well, boss. You was here.' He paused, diffidently. 'Wasn't you?' he asked—patently unable to bear the strain much longer.

Tatham nodded. 'I *was*,' he said. 'Somehow he does seem to believe me.'

'But you was, boss. I saw you. You was waiting for you . . .'

'That's all he wants to know,' interrupted Tatham. 'You'd swear it?' he added.

'O' course, boss. There ain't no question about it. We *all* saw you.'

Tough Tatham jerked a thumb. 'All right, Fatty. Scram.' Then, as the door closed once more, he turned to survey the inspector. 'Satisfied?' he asked.

'I suppose I am—more or less,' replied Higgins—a slight frown on his forehead.

'And you don't think I was in the West End this morning at ten to eleven—doing a spot of wage-snatching?' asked Tatham, raising supercilious eyebrows.

'You knew what I was driving at, then?'

'I can read, man,' contemptuously.

Inspector Higgins leaned forward. 'I wonder if you would mind showing me your hands?' he asked.

'It's a pleasure.' Tatham extended two hairy hands.

'The other way up, please.'

Tatham turned his hands palms upwards. 'Believe it or not, Higgins, but I've washed two or three times since eleven o'clock this morning. What do you expect to find? Blood?'

'No. Oil.'

'Oil, eh?' Tough Tatham surveyed his spotless palms with a large measure of interest, frowning as he did so. 'Why oil?' he asked at last.

'There was some on your thumb when you were at Harlbury.'

Tatham shook his head from side to side. 'You seem to know a helluva lot about me, Higgins. More than I do myself. Let's think. H'm! Maybe you're right. My clutch pedal's a bit stiff and I remember touching . . .' He broke off to stare at his right thumb. 'Seems to have gone now, doesn't it?'

'M'yes. Incidentally, what were you doing at Harlbury?'

Tough Tatham looked up from his hands into the inspector's face, then he folded his arms and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the edge of the table.

'That is entirely my business,' he said impressively. 'I think you'll agree with me that I have been very patient. I've borne with you up to now because I believe you to be essentially straight. I don't like you, Higgins—and I don't like any of your tribe . . . but that's probably mutual.' A half smile crossed his face and was gone. 'But don't try me too far.' He leaned back and drummed his fingers on the table top. 'And now I think you had better go.'

Inspector Higgins rose to his feet. 'Perhaps you're right,' he said. He made for the door, turned. 'I shall probably be back.'

Tough Tatham was sweeping the playing cards together; he picked them up and tapped them into compactness, shuffled and started to lay a line face upwards. 'And I shall probably be here,' he said, without looking up.

Inspector Higgins closed the door, and walked along the

side passage—not exactly with his tail between his legs but far from cock-a-hoop, a little bewildered at the outcome of the interview. There must be a catch somewhere—but he was cussed if he could see it.

Sergeant Brownall heaved a sigh of relief when the inspector emerged from the Water Rat and strode thoughtfully to the waiting car.

‘I—I was very nearly coming in after you, sir,’ he said.

Higgins climbed into the car. ‘Perhaps it was as well you didn’t, son,’ he said.

A second later they were on their way back to Scotland Yard. The inspector, more to clear his own mind than to put Brownall *au fait*, gave a résumé of his talk with Tatham, ending with a snort of self-derision. ‘The feller almost had me *liking him* at the finish,’ he said. ‘And what about you, sarge? Anything happen whilst I was inside?’

‘Somebody from the doorway gave the car a very cautious once-over.’ Sergeant Brownall sniggered. ‘I should never have spotted it if he hadn’t been holding a broom in his hand—and the head of the broom stuck out a mile.’

‘H’m! That’d be Fatty. It was the sort o’ thing he *would* do. Anything else?’

‘Somebody approached from the end of the street but changed his mind when he spotted the car. He may, of course, have gone into one of the houses. I couldn’t see.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘That’s all, sir.’

‘H’m!’ Inspector Higgins relapsed into silence.

No sooner had the car arrived at Scotland Yard than the constable on duty at the gate informed Higgins that Chief Inspector Dryan wanted him on a matter of some urgency.

The inspector blinked. It was patent that the matter was of some moment, for no chief inspector worthy of his *alt* would still be on duty at such a late hour otherwise. It was one of the privileges of office, when reaching that rank, to be able to knock off duty at a reasonable time o’ day. And old Dryan was still on duty. Well, well. The inspector devoutly hoped it was not one of his own peccadilloe which had come to light. His last expense sheet *had* been a bit of a mystery—even to himself. Not surprising, really, when he started with

the total—which he knew to be a true and honest figure—and then worked back to first causes, which were obscured in the mists of time. How could he be expected to remember each and every item . . . Dammit! He'd have to spend half his time jotting down odd ha'pence . . . and getting receipts for each.

The sudden realization that Chief Inspector Dryan would hardly wait as late as this merely to bicker over an expense account, caused Higgins to break into a trot along the corridor. He was almost breathless when he knocked on the chief inspector's door.

'Well?' A gruff growl from within did not seem to augur any too well.

Higgins opened the door.

Chief Inspector Dryan was seated at his desk. Once a fine figure of a man he was now rather running to seed, his ample stomach threatening to burst the bottom buttons of his waistcoat; his collar seemed to encircle his bull neck almost to the point of strangulation. He looked up, then snatched his horn-rimmed spectacles from his nose the better to glare at his underling. The inspector almost wilted under the stare.

Dryan breathed very deeply. 'The wanderer returns,' he said to the world at large. Then, more specifically: 'What the heck have you been up to this evening? You just clear off, without a word to anybody, take Brownall with you and—and . . . Well, I won't say vanish, exactly.' He picked up a paper from his desk, snapped his spectacles back on to his nose and sniffed. 'Listen. First of all some outraged motorist reports a case of blatantly dangerous driving in Rosemary Street, giving the registration number of your car. I thought it might have been pinched—but, before I could get a good laugh over that, I learn that you and Brownall had led in it. Then a Mr Fanworth rings . . .'

'Who?' The inspector stared wide-eyed.

Dryan waved an impatient hand. 'Wait till I've finished,' he growled. 'A Mr Fanworth rings up, says there's a suspicious car—again bearing your number, by the way—hanging round a hostel for girls, the man inside doing his level best to keep out of sight.' The chief inspector took another deep breath. 'And then one o' the Ghost Squad rings up, reports that Tough Tatham has got a late visitor at the Water Rat and gives us a car number to check up on.

Your car again. He looked up and again removed his glasses from his nose. 'What the heck have you been up to? Blazing a trail or something?'

The Ghost Squad. That body of undercover men—of the police, paid by the police, yet never under any circumstances seen in the company of a known policeman—who sometimes work with the gangs, always live in the underworld, and give those mysterious tips to the authorities which result in so many speedy arrests. Doubtless there was one working in the purlicue of the Water Rat. He was probably the man Brownall had seen approaching the car and who had . . .

'Well?' barked the chief inspector.

Inspector Higgins coughed deprecatingly. It was going to be just a little difficult trying to explain to the irate chief inspector that all his activities had started with a hunch—and not his own at that—and that as yet he did not even know what he was trying to elucidate, let alone justify the time he had spent on it. So far it was all rather nebulous, although he was convinced there was some skulduggery going on somewhere. He coughed again and started to explain—but did not get very far.

'Aw! Forget it!' said Dryan. 'I don't mind so much *you* chasing a wild goose will-o'-the-wisp half the night—but when you take Brownall with you, just when I want him, and keep *me* here half the night wading through a blasted file which couldn't be found in the first place and turns up on *your* blasted desk . . .' He broke off, more from want of breath than from lack of words—and Higgins jumped in quickly.

'Brownall's here now, sir,' he said.

'I'll bet he is,' grimly. 'And waiting outside, too. I left him a note on his desk to report to me.' Chief Inspector Dryan sighed heavily. 'Dammit, Higgy,' he said, in a more reasonable tone of voice. 'I thought young Brownall was in hospital so I didn't really expect him to be available. But when *you* more or less vanished . . .' He broke off once more and sighed again.

'What's the trouble, sir?' asked Higgins. Then, as he realized this was simply *asking* for another tirade, added *hastily*: 'I—I mean. What file are you talking about, sir?'

'That Langley file. The suicide business young Brownall looked into.'

Inspector Higgins simply stood and stared . . . and marvelled. Chief Inspector Dryan looked up, saw the expression on the inspector's face and smiled. Apparently the gale had blown itself out.

Dryan nodded his head. 'I—um—think that case is now definitely complete. I mean that we know now *why* the man committed suicide. A remarkable coincidence, really. Although perhaps coincidence is not quite the right word. Luck, maybe, though we should probably have got down to it at the finish. You see, Higgy, the Frantshire Police sent us down a bullet for expert appraisal. It had been dug out of a corpse they'd found hidden in an empty goods wagon in their main marshalling yard and had been dead for days and perhaps weeks. Yardley upstairs gave it the twice-over—the bullet, I mean—and soon decided the make of revolver which had fired it. Which promptly reminded him of another weapon of the same make which he'd handled a little while back. More from curiosity than anything else he compared the bullet with one he had fired from that revolver in the Langley business. And cursed if the pair didn't match—the rifling marks on each were identical.' Dryan leaned back in his chair and beamed. 'Can you beat it?' he asked.

Inspector Higgins scowled unseeingly into space.

'So there's the set-up,' continued Dryan. 'This Langley feller obviously shot himself because he expected any moment the other corpse to turn up. Couldn't stay the course, as it were.'

'Has the corpse been identified, sir?'

'Don't ask *me*. All we've got is the bullet. And as the Frantshire people have asked for our help, you can chuck all your skylarking shenanigans chasing rainbows in the abstract and get down to something concrete.' The chief inspector sniffed expressively. 'And you can take young Brownall with you.' He sniffed again, stretched and yawned. 'And I can get off to bed.' He peered at the inspector over his horn-rimmed spectacles. 'And high time, too, I might say,' he added—in final reproof.

'Er—yessir,' said Higgins—and hurried out, almost colliding with the anxious Brownall who was waiting patiently outside the door.

Chapter Eleven

IDENTIFICATION

IT would not have been a long journey by car to Frant, the county town of Frantshire, but Inspector Higgins decided to go by train—for two reasons. First and foremost, he'd had a long enough day as it was and it would be a poor advertisement for Scotland Yard if he arrived half dead in the middle of the night. Moreover, both he and Brownall could snatch a few hours' sleep in the Rest Room before catching the first train and could utilize the journey in rounding off the process. The second reason was one of finance. It was up to the Frantshire Police to foot the bill and provide such transport as might be necessary. No need to give them ideas by rolling up in one's own car.

And the arrangement was welcomed by the local officer when Higgins had telephoned; perhaps he, too, was in need of a night's rest.

So, when Higgins and the sergeant alighted at Frant Railway Station the following morning, Superintendent Goodman, of the Frantshire County Constabulary, was there to meet them.

'Good of you to come so quickly,' he said.

The inspector, having satisfied himself that there was no subtle sarcasm in the remark, held out his large hand. 'Caught the first available train,' he said expansively. 'Pity there wasn't one sooner. Can't be helped, though.'

Sergeant Brownall looked down his nose. Then he, too, shook hands with the local superintendent.

'The goods yard is quite near,' said Goodman. 'I don't want to make any suggestions but it might save time . . .'

'Of course. Of course.'

The superintendent led the way. And the Frant goods yard seemed to cover acres and acres, with miles of criss-cross railway lines, scores of switching points, several turntables, and with squat shunting engines fussily assembling wagons—

presumably sorting into destinations—and with shunters seemingly risking life and limb dodging between stationary and moving trucks. So far as Higgins was concerned it was utter chaos. He was not a bit surprised that a body had been successfully hidden here for so long; it seemed a wonder it had ever been found at all!

The three officers walked alongside a wide wall of neatly stacked coal, with Higgins keeping a very wary eye open for wagons and engines on the move—from rail level they seemed even more lethal. At last they reached a siding, with but one solitary railway wagon on its entire length.

'This is it,' said the superintendent. 'I got them to shunt it here, out of the way. Actually it was taken out of a string of six empties when the body was found. It's been gone over for prints and we found dozens. But unless we take the prints of every man on the entire system . . .'

'Quite. Looks like a coal wagon.'

'Yes. Coal, rubble, flints for the permanent way—in fact, anything of that nature which merely requires tipping in and tipping out, and doesn't require careful handling.'

Inspector Higgins surveyed the wagon; on its side were cryptic notations in chalk, all of which had been scored through save one: 'Ft.' And that, presumably, was an abbreviation for Frant, its last destination.

The inspection which followed was thorough—and dirty. The actual place where the body had been found was marked in chalk on the floor of the truck, and the superintendent explained that there were photos available of the body *in situ*.

'Who actually found it?' asked Higgins.

'The driver of one of the engines here. As a matter of fact he first spotted it three weeks ago but thought it was a tramp having a quiet kip and so ignored it on the live-and-let-live principle. And he wasn't on the same set of rails until a couple of days ago—and when he saw the supposed tramp was still there . . .' The superintendent spread his hands and left it at that.

'Three weeks ago, eh? And where was this truck all that time?'

'On the third set of rails from here—with five others, as I told you.'

'With trucks on the rails in between?'

The superintendent nodded. 'At some time or other there must have been. But there's no means of knowing whether or not there were any intervening trucks at the time the man was dumped here.'

'You're sure he was dumped, then?'

'Well, inspector, it's not for me to influence you at all—but the man was lying face downwards and he had been shot in the chest. He might, of course, have fallen that way if he had been shot whilst in the truck but from the absence of bloodstains on the floor here . . .'

'Quite. I'm just trying to get the general picture. I don't doubt you are right. But to dump a man in this truck couldn't be done single-handed.'

'No. It was more than a one-man job. Probably more than two men. It would be quite an undertaking to lift a man to the top of the wagon—the height it is—before he could be dropped inside. And if there *were* intervening wagons at the time . . .'

'M'yes. You'd think they'd choose the first they came to. But the answer to that may be that any intervening wagons might have been roofed—or full. This was probably the first empty wagon they came on.' Inspector Higgins scowled at a distant signal. 'But I still can't see why they went to all that trouble. They must have known the body would be discovered eventually. If their purpose was to hide it . . . Well, I can think of dozens of more effective places.'

'Yes. I thought of that, too.'

'H'm! Could be an inheritance job. Somebody didn't want to wait seven years before death could be presumed. They wouldn't want the body to be hidden for ever; all that was needed was a certain delay before it was found. Then it would merely be a matter of identification.'

Superintendent Goodman smiled, nodded. 'The only point against that is the fact that before the body was dumped, every possible means of identification had been removed.'

'H'm! That's different.'

'And that's another reason I'm sure it was dumped here. If the man had been shot in the wagon, the murderer would hardly hang about here for all the time it would take to clear

his pockets and so forth. My idea, for what it is worth, is that wherever the man might have been shot—he was brought here by car . . . the railway loading road runs alongside the rails . . . and dumped in the wagon one dark night.'

'But doesn't shunting go on nearly all through the night?'

'Yes. But not so much this end of the yard. Trucks here are generally spares and empties—available when wanted. There wouldn't be an awful lot of risk of being seen.'

Inspector Higgins scratched his head with his little fingernail. 'I'm not saying the body wasn't dumped, superintendent,' he said at last. 'But there's no earthly reason why it should have been dumped here—in Frant.'

'I don't get it,' said Goodman, frowning as he did so. 'The trucks have been idle on this nearby siding for weeks . . . three, at least, according to that engine driver and . . .'

'Yes. I know. But that's not to say the body wasn't in the wagon when it actually got here. I mean it could have been deposited in this wagon at any station in the entire system . . . and unsuspectingly brought here when the wagon was returned to base, as it were.'

'My hat! I suppose it could!' Superintendent Goodman grinned widely. 'I'm glad we turned this over to you. You've got quite a problem, haven't you? I forget how many railway stations there are but . . .'

'Oh, it may not be all that difficult. I dare say the railway people can decipher, from the hieroglyphics chalked on the side, the more recent ports of call of this wagon. And there must be way-bills or something. Perhaps you could get its itinerary for me.'

'I'll speak to the stationmaster here on our way back.'

'Then let's go. I've finished here for the time being.'

Ten minutes later the three officers were in a private room of the Frant police headquarters, where Superintendent Goodman produced for inspection a series of very clear but rather gruesome photographs taken from many angles from the top of the wagon. Inspector Higgins was not surprised that the engine driver who had first seen the body had deemed the man to be asleep, for the prone posture was not unnatural.

But the photographs of the dead face were ghastly, for the man had been dead for weeks. The lips had contracted,

giving the face a savage leer, and revealing a set of uneven teeth with one incisor broken to a point. Higgins scowled at the picture with distaste, quite certain he had seen the man before somewhere, but unable to be more specific owing to the distortion of death.

He pointed to the broken tooth in the photograph. 'Looks as if the feller might have put up a bit of a scrap,' he observed.

'Misleading,' replied Goodman laconically. 'Our medico says it's an old break. And there was no bruising of the lips which there would have been otherwise. I thought of that.'

Inspector Higgins sighed. 'Well, I suppose we shall have to go and see him,' he said with marked reluctance.

The superintendent coughed. 'Not *we*. You! I've had enough of him. He's not nice.'

But Higgins learned little from his inspection of the body itself—save that his stomach was not so strong as it used to be. . . . He was more than relieved to get out again. Somewhat disconcertingly he was now convinced that he had never seen the man before in his life. Again he stared at the photograph which had given him a different impression. Did it remind him of anybody—someone who might be a relative, say? *That* might be the answer.

'I've got all the clothes here,' said Goodman, interrupting the inspector's train of thought.

Higgins put the photograph down and turned to the heap of clothing. Again it was not nice; the waistcoat and under-clothing had ominous stains. The jacket was of good material and well cut. The tailor's tab was most unhelpful. 'Universal Clothiers. Branches Everywhere.' It was a hundred to six the man had bought the suit off the peg.

'The stuff's been vacuum'd and analysed,' remarked the superintendent. 'I got a preliminary report this morning. I don't think it will help much. Coal dust predominates—which is not surprising. But I kept the fluff from the pockets and trouser turn-ups separatc. There's a trace of sour soil which might mean anything. Then there's the usual pencil graphite, tobacco fronds, minute paper particles and metal rubbings. There was a rusty nail and a sliver of wood—deal, they tell me—in the trouser turn-up. And traces of chalk in the ticket pocket of the jacket.'

The inspector nodded and delved into the outer pocket of the jacket, groping for the inner ticket pocket. When he removed his hand there were traces of chalk on his fingertips . . . Green chalk. He looked up from his fingers to stare thoughtfully at Sergeant Brownall. 'Billiards chalk,' he said, wiping his fingertips on a handkerchief.

The sergeant frowned. 'But, sir, the man *must* have been dead long before that box of chalk . . .'

'Quite. Quite,' ironically. 'I *am* aware of that. It's the association of ideas. And it was your pal Oakfield who . . . Say, sarge. Have you got that photograph with you? That dinner photograph.' And Higgins held out an impatient hand.

Sergeant Brownall pulled the photograph from his pocket. They glanced at it together. The wondering superintendent crossed to stare over their shoulders.

The figure in the forefront, beaming at the camera, was showing a set of uneven teeth—one of which was broken to a point.

'I *knew* I'd seen him before somewhere,' muttered Higgins, with large satisfaction.

'My hat! It's the feller in front.' Superintendent Goodman sounded very excited.

The inspector nodded. 'Yes. Name of Cockell. Used to be a bit of a snooker player, I'm told. Hence the chalk. H'm! You know, sarge, there seems to be a strange mortality among the secretaries of the Rosemary Residential Club.'

'I don't know what the deuce the pair of you are talking about,' interposed the superintendent testily.

Higgins explained. Superintendent Goodman listened with growing wonder.

'Then you knew all the time, before you came down here . . .'

'No, no. Not at all. I hadn't an inkling.'

'But . . . Well, it's the quickest case I've known. You've got your murderer. At least, you know who it is. The suicide Langley obviously . . .'

'Yes, *yes*. It *could* be, of course.'

'But, sir,' interposed the sergeant in a reproachful tone of voice. 'I thought you agreed with me that it wasn't sui . . .'

'You're sold, son,' said Higgins cryptically. 'I'm not.

And if Langley *did* kill this feller, I wonder what he got out of it.'

'He got his job, seemingly,' said Goodman.

'M'yes. In which case there must be some substantial perquisite in the position which is not apparent on the surface.' The inspector shook his head. 'It won't really wash, you know. Langley wouldn't know he was going to get the job . . . or would he?' Inspector Higgins suddenly grinned and eyed the sergeant. 'Makes me a bit nervous tagging *you* along, sarge,' he said. 'You wouldn't be thinking of pushing me under a bus or summat, to get my job, would you?'

Sergeant Brownall was not amused.

Chapter Twelve

REFERENCES

WHEN Inspector Higgins, with Sergeant Brownall in the opposite corner of the compartment, was seated in the up train for the return journey to London, he reflected that, on the whole, it had not been such a bright idea to go to Frant by train after all. It would have been so very much quicker by car. But then, he was not to have known that the Frant end of the case would have folded up so quickly. There was an element of coincidence about the business which was, perhaps, not quite coincidence. Old Dryan had put him on the job because he was already interesting himself in the Langley suicide and . . .

'One thing, sarge,' he said, looking up, 'if it wasn't suicide, we *do* know now where Langley's murderer could have got his key to Langley's office.'

'From Cockell, you mean, sir?'

'Of course. With his other belongings. It don't make sense yet—but it *could* be a sort of frame-up on Langley. They'd reason that, despite the removal of all identifying objects, it might well be that Cockell's body might one day be identified—and that'd lead us straight to the Rosemary Club and . . .' He broke off to stare unseeingly at the flying landscape and pondered the point. He did not speak again for a long time; then he continued as if there had been no break whatever. 'And that's just where it is going to lead us,' he said, nodding his head in emphasis. 'The Rosemary Club.' He pursed his lips. 'The only time I've been inside the place was at Fanworth's invitation. This time I'm going on my own invitation. It's high time somebody took the place apart to see what makes it tick. There's a helluva lot of funny business going on there . . . Or *was*,' he added significantly.

'You don't think there is now, sir?' asked Brownall.

Higgins shrugged his shoulders. 'If what I said just now is right—and they reasoned that the identification of Cockell would lead us straight to the club . . . Well! Surely they'd take care there was nothing for us to find when we *did* arrive.'

'I found nothing, sir.'

'That's the point. When Langley died the place had already been cleaned up—prior to the identification of Cockell. It *may* be that now you've been and gone they'll open up again whatever was going on before. Or . . . Dammit! We can talk round and round the point till the cows come home—and get nowhere. Let's forget it till we get there.'

There was another long silence, broken at last by the sergeant.

'Did you get the itinerary of that wagon, sir?' he asked.

'Yes. And I'm afraid it doesn't help much. It was loaded at Frant with ballast for the permanent way. This was dumped, in heaps, at various spots on the route to London. The five trucks that were with it were used in the same way. There's no means of knowing when our particular truck was completely empty. But the six of them were definitely empty when they were assembled, with others, in London, for the return journey to Frant. And a month ago the long line of empty wagons was hauled back to Frant between midnight and two o'clock in the morning when traffic was light. If it stopped at all it would only be when the signals were against it. So it seems patent that Cockell must have been dumped in the truck either at Frant or in London. Cockell lived in London.' The inspector spread his hands. 'Your guess is as good as mine.'

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Mr Quenlock's usually benevolent countenance was creased with lines of worry as he eyed his large visitor who was seated on the opposite chair.

'You—you say that Cockell was *murdered*?' he said in a horrified voice—the sentence going up the scale until the final word was almost falsetto.

Inspector Higgins nodded grimly.

The pair were in the tiny secretarial office of the Rosemary Residential Club, where the Chairman of the Committee was

temporarily acting as secretary until a new appointment was made.

'But—but this is fantastic,' continued Mr Quenlock. 'It—it will do the club incalculable harm.'

'It didn't do Cockell much *good*,' said Higgins dryly. 'Perhaps you can tell me the actual day he—um—left his job here.'

'I—it was a month ago, inspector. He—he just left us without a word. Left us high and dry. It was really most inconsiderate . . . Oh, dear. Of course. The poor fellow couldn't help . . .' The chairman's voice trailed off into embarrassed silence.

'Didn't you make any inquiries at the time?'

'No. He left everything in order. I mean—er—naturally we went through the books, when he left us so precipitately, in case—er . . . But there was nothing wrong. He—he had hinted to me more than once that he was—um—dissatisfied with his—uni—emoluments. And I had told him that, with his free board and living quarters here, he was getting quite a reasonable . . . Well. I mean . . . I was convinced he had just left us to—um—improve his position and . . .' Mr Quenlock smiled a little thinly. 'I was waiting for an approach from somebody for a reference and then I should certainly have told them how Cockell had just walked out on us and . . . Oh, dear. And to think that the poor chap was dead all the time. And—and murdered, at that.' Mr Quenlock wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief.

'You mentioned references just now,' said Higgins. 'What about the references Cockell gave when he was taken on here? I'd like to have a look at them.'

'I—er—I'm afraid that was rather before my time,' said Mr Quenlock, rising to his feet and crossing to a steel filing cabinet. 'Still, there should be something here . . .' The top drawer slid easily open on its ball-bearings. The chairman 'walked' his fore- and middle-fingers along the edges of a series of upright folders. 'Ah, here we are,' he said—and extracted from the cabinet a thin flat cardboard folder, which he placed on the desk. 'This should give us all the gen,' he continued, as he flicked the folder open. 'I *do* hope that . . . Good gracious me!' The file was empty.

Inspector Higgins did not move. He merely glanced at the empty folder and then raised his eyes to Mr Quenlock's expressive face.

'News to you?' he asked—lifting one quizzical eyebrow.

'My—my dear sir. I simply cannot imagine why or—or when this . . . Unless, of course, Langley . . .' Mr Quenlock lapsed into uneasy silence, leaving an obvious implication unexpressed.

Inspector Higgins merely nodded his head. If Langley had had anything to do with the murder of his predecessor then he would assuredly have removed all particulars from the file. One would have thought, though, that he would have destroyed the cardboard folder as well. Higgins reached across the desk and picked it up. M'yes. The file was labelled 'Cockell' right enough. 'I'll have this, if I may,' he said. 'Might be useful.'

'Useful? In what way?'

'Fingerprints.' Higgins carefully dropped the folder into his document case and zipped it up. 'And now let's have a look at the Langley file,' he said.

'Langley file?' Mr Quenlock shook his head. 'There isn't one. I explained *that* at the time the poor chap . . .'

'What about *his* references?' interrupted Higgins.

Mr Quenlock coughed deprecatingly. 'I—er—I'm afraid that I—um—more or less took him on trust,' he explained. 'You—you see, I had read some of his books.'

The inspector leaned back in his chair. 'Authors being above suspicion, I suppose?' he said, with heavy irony. 'What sort of stuff did he write?'

'Why, costume romances I suppose you would call them.'

'H'm! Cloak and dagger stuff. "Hey, varlet. Prithee come hither" sort of business?'

'Well, yes. More or less. I—er—I am rather partial to that type of reading. When I took him on he presented our library here with copies of . . .'

'I understood that in one of his books he introduced a revolver. Wouldn't that be rather an anachronism? I mean a guy armed to the teeth with a couple o' daggers wouldn't stand much chance . . .'

'Oh! That was in a modern story he tried his hand at.'

Mr Quenlock made of mouse a sheer distaste. 'A detective story. I disliked it intensely. He told me it was an experiment when I asked him about it.'

'H'm! When was that?'

'When he applied for the job here.'

Higgins smiled inwardly. Langley seemed to have sold himself most effectively to Mr Quenlock on that occasion, if all they had discussed were his books. 'And how did Langley come to apply for the job?' he asked.

'Oh! We advertised the vacancy in the Press.'

'So that he couldn't have known beforehand that he would get the job?'

'Of course not. He was the third applicant I interviewed.'

Inspector Higgins merely nodded his head. That settled one thing, anyhow. Superintendent Goodman's contention in this respect was definitely out. The inspector looked up.

'And have you a file on Mr Fanworth?' he asked.

And Mr Quenlock seemed shocked to the very core. 'Mr Fanworth? Mr Fanworth? Of course not. Why, Mr Fanworth is practically an institution here. He owns all our debentures. He could sell us up if his interest wasn't paid. A file on Mr. Fanworth? Oh, no. No, no.' Mr Quenlock shook his head in marked emphasis.

'He is a wealthy man, then?'

'I have no knowledge of his finances,' said the chairman with heavy dignity. 'The obvious person to ask about that is surely Mr Fanworth himself.'

'H'm! Perhaps you're right,' responded Higgins, off-handedly. 'And have you a file on Mr Kenton?' he asked.

'Kenton? Oh, no. He is a protégé of Mr Fanworth, who recommended him for a job here.'

'No other references?'—quizzically.

'No. A recommendation from Mr Fanworth is quite enough for us.'

'H'm! Not to put too fine a point upon it, Mr Quenlock, you don't really worry overmuch about *anybody's* references, *do you?*'

'Of course we do.' Mr Quenlock sounded quite annoyed at the suggestion.

Inspector Higgins raised one eyebrow. 'Indeed?' He

smiled inwardly. It was quite patent that Miss Langley, working here on the dining-room staff—and under an assumed name at that!—had certainly not been questioned much as to references. Was it possible that she knew Mr Quenlock would be easy meat? Higgins frowned at the thought. Then turned quickly as the door was flung open; framed in the doorway was a horsey individual who beamed impartially on both occupants of the room.

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ he said breezily, ‘but the lights in the billiards room have fused.’

‘Can’t you see I’m busy, Oakfield?’ said Mr Quenlock in a testy voice. ‘Can’t you do it yourself or something?’

‘All right. All right.’ The door slammed.

The chairman breathed heavily. ‘I’ll have a blasted spring lock put on the door,’ he said. ‘Ought to have done it when I had the chance. Like a fool I had the same type of lock put on again.’

‘You had to smash the lock, then, at the time of Langley’s—um—suicide?’

‘Yes. It was the only way to get in. Well, not exactly the only way . . . I mean, we would have needed a ladder to get to the window and . . .’

Inspector Higgins stood up and crossed to the window. He threw up the sash and leaned out. Below was that diminutive courtyard in which he had first encountered the aggressive Kenton; he had a foreshortened view of the maw of the narrow tunnel to the street, through which that car had backed . . .

‘Excuse me, inspector,’ said a voice at his ear. ‘But Mr Fanworth does *not* like these windows to be opened. They—um—overlook his own apartment. That’s why they are of frosted glass.’ And Mr Quenlock made to close the window.

Inspector Higgins brushed his hand aside. A curtain behind a window opposite twitched; then was pushed aside. Frowning imperiously, Mr Fanworth glared across at these intruders on his privacy. The inspector smiled and bowed. The curtains fell back into place.

‘There! He’s seen us now.’ Mr Quenlock was quite agitated.

‘So he has,’ said Higgins equably, and continued to stare

thoughtfully down to the courtyard below. Was it something which Langley might have seen enacted below which . . . And what Langley might have seen, Cockell might have seen also . . .

‘It—it’s very draughty, inspector.’

The inspector turned at last to stare at the chairman. It was quite evident that Mr Quenlock was much in awe of his club’s debenture holder. The inspector grinned, raised his arm to close the window—and paused again. From below came the sound of a car. Again he leaned out of the window. It was a dark Ocelot, right enough, though from this angle it was impossible to see its registration number. Skilful driver, too—the way the car was handled in the complicated manoeuvre to make a complete turn in the confined space. And it was not halted until it covered the precise place where Higgins had seen those tell-tale spots of oil. The door opened and a man alighted—in chauffeur’s uniform with a peaked cap.

Mr Fanworth emerged from the rear door of the club; the chauffeur promptly removed his cap, tucked it under one arm and solicitously helped Mr Fanworth into the car—and slammed the door.

Higgins cupped his hands to his lips. ‘Oi!’ The call was incisive and seemed to fill the air-well with sound. Behind him the inspector heard the chairman’s gasp of horror and consternation at such outrageous conduct.

The chauffeur, his hand on the off-door of the car, promptly looked upwards. Even at this distance it was patent that he was sporting the father of all black eyes.

Jerusalem! It was Trilby Hat!

‘Hey, you!’ The inspector’s yell was even more violent than before.

Whether or not recognition was mutual, the car door slammed and the car was vanishing beneath the roof of that tunnel to the street, before Higgins had even realized the futility of trying to stop it.

Chapter Thirteen

SEARCH

'BUT that's the number of Mr Fanworth's car,' said Mr Quenlock, in a protesting tone of voice, as Inspector Higgins slammed the telephone instrument back to its cradle.

'Is it?' responded Higgins, a shade irascibly. 'And what do you know of his chauffeur?'

'Only that ~~he~~ ^{he}'s got one. The man is not one of the club staff. And I *must* say I am relieved it is the chauffeur and *not* Mr Fanworth who . . .'

'Look here, sir. I couldn't help you overhearing my instructions just now. But I'm damned if I'm going to be cross-questioned over them.'

The chairman blinked—and seemed painfully embarrassed over his breach of good manners.

Inspector Higgins suddenly smiled. 'Let's forget it, shall we?' he said. 'And now I'd like you to show me the premises below—particularly the purlieus of the rear door below.' And he jerked a thumb to the window which was now closed.

'But—but only Mr Fanworth uses that door.'

'That's what *you* think. Oakfield has used it for ~~one~~ ^{one}. And . . .' Higgins broke off. He had almost mentioned ~~his~~ ^{his} Langley. He must keep a watch on his tongue, even with such an innocuous old buffer as the chairman. 'Will you show me the way? Or shall I find it myself?'

'Er . . .'

'Thanks very much.' Higgins rose to his feet and made for the door.

And outside the door was the ubiquitous Oakfield. For such an ebullient personage he seemed almost disconcerted. The inspector, eyeing him speculatively, wondered precisely how much he might have overheard. Oakfield coughed and beamed apologetically at the chairman.

'I—um—I just thought I'd tell you that the lights have

come on again,' he said—and edged away. 'I—er—think that it was only . . .'

'When did *you* use the rear door?' demanded Mr Quenlock, in a forthright manner.

'The rear door? I have *never* used the rear exit,' said Oakfield unblushingly. 'And even if I had, I am a member, aren't I?'

'This gentleman says you *did*,' insisted Mr Quenlock.

'Oh ' And who is he?'

'A detective inspector from Scotland Yard.'

Oakfield seemed momentarily taken aback; then recovered some of his aplomb. 'An inspector, eh? We *are* honoured. Last time it was a mere sergeant, *wasn't* it?'

Inspector Higgins bridled a little. He could well understand how Oakfield had got under Brownall's skin. He eyed Oakfield up and down; and nodded his head. 'Yes,' he said. 'And next time it will probably be a constable, for we haven't finished with *you* yet.' He turned to the chairman. 'Which way?' he asked.

The pair walked along a corridor, leaving Mr Oakfield just a little abashed. And shortly afterwards the inspector was on familiar territory and grinned at the recollection of his bum's rush of the previous occasion. Again he walked down those stairs to the carpeted corridor leading to the rear door, but this time he took more note of other doors in the passage—and asked questions. Staff rest-room, staff ablutions, kitchen, cloak-room, linen-room, cleaning utensils, workshop. . . .

Higgins halted. 'Workshop? What sort of workshop?'

Mr Quenlock shrugged his shoulders and threw open the door. 'Just any odd job that may arise,' he said. 'It's not used so much now I'm told—but in the past we used to do all our own plumbing and running repairs.' He smiled thinly. 'Like replacing burnt-out fuses,' he said, apparently apropos of nothing in particular.

The inspector chuckled. 'Yes. I'm afraid that *I* don't like Mr Oakfield, either.' He crossed to a bench with a vice attached. 'Who uses the place most?' he asked, peering thoughtfully at a can of lubricating oil on a shelf, with an adjustable spanner and a wrench alongside.

'Anybody, so far as I am aware.'

'Kenton, for instance?'

'Well—er—yes, I suppose so. He is our current—er—handyman.'

'H'm!' Inspector Higgins stared round the room. From the footprints on the dusty floor it was patent that the room was in fairly constant use, though most of the tools on a rack looked as if they might have hung there for years without being touched. Rust and dust. In the corner, a legacy from the past, was a pile of dirty wood-shavings—which reminded Higgins of . . . what? Oh, yes. That heap of chopped firewood alongside the Hall of the Clear Thinkers. And yet some of the shavings looked new. Oh, no. That was merely the underside, free from dust, where the shavings had been turned over. H'm! That meant the pile had been disturbed fairly recently and . . .

'I'll have to have this place cleaned up,' said Mr Quenlock, with marked disgust. 'It is a perfect disgrace. Had I known you were coming . . .' He broke off as the inspector, with one large boot, raised a cloud of dust as he dragged it through the pile of shavings. There was a metallic rattle. From beneath the pile a pair of very new number plates emerged and scraped along the concrete floor. On each were three figures, followed by the letters X C V.

Mr Quenlock stared at the number-plates as though in a trance; then looked up to find the inspector's cold eyes upon him.

'W-what an extraordinary thing,' the chairman muttered, shaking his head in bewilderment.

Higgins gravely nodded his head. 'Yes, isn't it?' he said quietly. Then: 'You know Sergeant Brownall, I think. I wonder if you would be so kind as to fetch him for me? You'll find him at the main entrance.'

'Er—of course. Of course.' Mr Quenlock hurried out as though glad to be gone. And Higgins watched him go with speculative eyes. Was it possible that one could be the chairman of a place like this and *not* to know what was going on? True, so far as Higgins was aware, Quenlock had only recently done any secretarial duties—and before that had been little more than a figure-head. Or was it that he was too much in awe of Mr Fanworth to worry unduly . . . ?

Inspector Higgins blew out his cheeks. It would all come out in the wash. And meanwhile . . . He started a systematic search of the work-room, but did not get very far before Brownall appeared at the doorway, and at once spotted the number plates on the concrete floor.

'G-golly, sir. Isn't that the number they . . .'

'M'yes. I want you to phone for the print boys. Where's Q₁tenlock?'

'I don't know, sir. As soon as he gave me your message . . .'

'All right. All right. You made a note of comings and goings—particularly goings—after our arrival?'

'Yessir. The doorman kept me posted as to names. Oakfield and Unwin, incidentally, have just left.'

Higgins scowled thoughtfully at his own fingernails; then nodded. 'All right, son. Phone for the boys. Tell 'em to come in the back way. I'll see the gates are open.'

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Inspector Higgins, back at Scotland Yard, was inclined to be a little irascible. 'But it's fantastic,' he was saying. 'I phone you the moment the Ocelot leaves the club, I tell you it's being driven by a uniformed chauffeur with a black eye you can see for miles and with another man in the rear seat. I even give you the number I think is being used—at least it is the number which was on the car when I followed it last night—and yet you tell me it can't be found.'

'Well, sir. It hasn't been found yet. We had a patrol car at the rear of the club in three minutes. All cars were alerted. There's still time . . .'

'Yeah! Time for the pair of 'em to be half-way to China. They *can't* have vanished.'

'Well, sir. If the number wasn't right . . .'

'Dammit! What's the number matter? Do you mean to tell me that if a patrolman spotted even a sky-blue pink Ocelot being driven by a beefy black-eyed b . . . Oh! Forget it,' he snarled. 'What about fingerprints?'

'Those on that trilby hat were duplicated in that work-room, sir,' replied the officer—glad of the change of subject. 'As were another set we found on those playing cards from

that chapel place. These were on those number plates as well.'

Inspector Higgins pursed his lips and nodded his head. 'Made by the man Kenton, without a doubt, I should say. And no record about either, I suppose?' raising one interrogatory eyebrow.

'I'm afraid not, sir.'

'H'm! And what about Shorty Webb? He was released this morning, as instructed, I suppose?'

'Of course, sir. And followed. He went straight back to Blacksmith Lane and seemed absolutely dumbfounded to discover that the call box was no longer there. According to the latest report from his trailer, Webb is just more or less mooning round the district at a loose end.'

'M'yes. Looking for his paymaster, Kenton, I guess. Whom he won't find.' Higgins sniffed. 'All the same, when the trailer next reports, warn him of the possibility of Webb contacting Kenton. He's already had Kenton's description. And if he *does* happen to spot him, tell him to let Webb go hang—and concentrate on Kenton.'

'Very good, sir. Will you want him to bring Kenton in?'

'No. Follow and report. I imagine Kenton is small fry in the organization. I'm hoping he'll lead us to the others.'

'I understand, sir.'

'Good. And that call box you mentioned just now. Anything further from the telephone people?' asked Higgins, cocking his head to one side.

'Well, yessir—in a way. Their office at Daybourne exchange reported a trunk call from there to the call box number about six weeks ago. Apparently someone there had seen the number mentioned in the *Evening Sentinel* in the report on the explosion and remembered that . . .'

'Cut the cackle, man,' interrupted Higgins impatiently. 'What have you done about it? *Who* put in the trunk call? *What* was the subscriber's . . .'

'Another call box, I'm afraid, sir.'

The inspector breathed deeply. 'All right,' he said—wagging an impatient palm. 'And what happened at Daybourne six weeks ago—besides a trunk call to London?'

The officer peered uncertainly up into the inspector's face. 'I'm afraid, sir, that I don't quite . . .'

'Phone the Daybourne police. Give 'em the date. And ask,' said Higgins, in a very forthright tone of voice, as he turned on his heel. 'You'll find me in my office.'

He was not very much surprised, some ten minutes later, to learn that, six weeks ago, the Mayor of Daybourne had lost a load of valuables during the evening, whilst attending a Mayoral function. The culprits had not been apprehended. Civic pride, apparently, had precluded the calling for expert assistance from the Yard.

So there we are, reflected Higgins. More proof that the kiosk in Blacksmith Lane was once the connecting link between the gang . . . with the rear exit from the Rosemary Club as the probable terminus. That wage-snatch business, now. It seemed a certainty that Fanworth's Ocelot had been used with the false number plates found in that work-room. Trilby Hat might have been driving. Kenton, because of his prints on the plates, most certainly effected the change of numbers. And it might even have been Trilby Hat who had driven the car away again. It was a cinch he couldn't have taken it far—for he was back on foot again, outside those rear gates, when Miss Langley had emerged. He couldn't have taken it far. Higgins pondered the point. It almost looked . . .

Dammit! If he hadn't taken it far *then*—wasn't it possible that he hadn't taken it far when, with Fanworth in the rear, he had left the club a little while ago and . . . Jerusalem! That *might* explain why it had vanished so completely when all the London patrol cars were on the look-out for it!

Come to think of it, where was the car housed when it was not in use? Surely not in that air- and light-well which formed that diminutive courtyard at the rear of the club? No. It was hardly likely to be left there in all weathers. And to be of any real convenience the garage would have to be somewhere not too far from the place.

The inspector reached for his telephone. Mr Quenlock was apologetic. No, he did not know where Mr Fanworth garaged his car. As a matter of fact there was a scheme to come before the committee for the rear yard to be roofed over. It had been shelved many times but Mr Fanworth had now agreed to defray the cost provided the rental was negligible.

It required thinking over. After all, Mr Fanworth was not the only member of the club, despite the fact that he owned all the debentures and . . .

Higgins stemmed the flood at last and thankfully replaced the instrument in its cradle; five seconds later he was picking it up again in response to the insistent summons of its bell.

'Inspector Higgins? Indall here, sir. Calling from Harlbury. I *think* there may be something doing at Newton Court, sir. There's a man been hanging around the end of the street there taking a decided interest in the Hall. At least, it looked like that to me. Tallish chap. I can't give any real description because you told me to keep well under cover.' Constable Indall sounded a shade apologetic.

'Quite right, Indall. Quite right. But is that all?'

'Well, sir. When Anderson, the caretaker at the Hall, came out to his bit of shopping the man seemed to give him very much of the once-over when he turned the corner. ~~Left~~ Well out of Anderson's way, though. Almost as though he didn't want to be recognized.'

'But made no attempt to get into the Hall while Anderson was away?'

'No, sir. But he was still there when Anderson came back with some fish and chips. And watched him all the way back to the Hall. Then he went away.'

'H'm! Waiting for dark, eh?' mused Higgins—more or less to himself.

'That's what I thought, sir. Shall I arrange for a police dog and handler to be ready in case . . .'

'No, no. You're forgetting the cat, aren't you? The best trained dogs *are* apt to revert to type on occasions. We don't want too many complications.' Inspector Higgins scowled at his blotting pad for a moment, then: 'Had this feller a black eye?' he asked.

'I wasn't near enough to notice, sir.'

'H'm! I think you *would* have noticed it.' Another long pause. 'All right, Indall. Stay put. And don't take too much notice this evening if Sergeant Brownall and I roll up.' Again he replaced the instrument on its rest, and again subjected his blotting pad to a deep scowl more of concentration than malevolence.

The Hall of the Clear Thinkers. Harlbury. Where a certain gentleman *might* have bought his trilby hat. And from where Tough Tatham had certainly tried to telephone that vanished kiosk. And, where Tough Tatham was concerned, it was unwise to take unnecessary risks. The inspector was half minded to notify his colleague in charge of the Costerley Grange business that the period of masterly inactivity might be nearing its end, and that the Beauty of Bangkok might soon be returned to her rightful owner . . . but, on second thoughts, there was plenty of time for that. So far, it was only a hunch of Constable Indall's. . . .

Inspector Higgins suddenly grinned. Why be specious about it all? The plain fact of the matter was that he did *not* like other officers of equal rank trespassing on his preserves. Moreover, he rather fancied himself in any tussle with the allegedly redoubtable Tough Tatham.

All the same—and rather sheepishly at that—he indented for a police automatic before setting off for Harlbury a little later. He was not over-anxious to follow in the footsteps of the last two secretaries of the Rosemary Residential Club.

Chapter Fourteen

ACTION

THE lighting of Harlbury High Street was very good indeed, which was probably necessitated by the steady flow of traffic in either direction; and the lighting was still very good indeed after the High Street had merged into that other street of an entirely different name—which, so far as Inspector Higgins was concerned, was a bit of a nuisance, for Constable Indall would have a heck of a job keeping well under cover if more or less lighted all the time. On the other hand, of course, it would be a distinct help to him in keeping his watch on the place. Higgins grinned to himself. You can't have it both ways.

And it almost appeared as if the local council or responsible authority, having excelled itself on the main streets, decided to economize on the others—for in the short Newton Court there was no public lighting whatever. Such light as there was, percolated through the chinks of the blinds from the terrace houses on either side, whilst the Hall of the Clear Thinkers at the end was but a dark silhouette against the night sky.

It was not until the inspector had almost reached the Hall that he realized that there *was* some sort of luminant within which was just sufficient to outline the grimy coloured windows of the main hall. So there was somebody at home, anyhow. Someone other than Anderson, the caretaker? H'm! So far as Higgins was aware, Anderson used the upper room only. The main hall, with its litter of cigarette ends and with its table and chairs on the raised platform, was the probable meeting place for the gang. And now had a light of sorts. H'm! Higgins wondered whether that grimy pack of cards had been missed. They'd probably blame Anderson for that, anyway. In any case, the chances were that they had forgotten all about the pack by now, because—according to

Anderson—they hadn't been near the place for weeks. Then why return after all this time? Higgins rather thought he knew the answer to that one. Kenton, for one, had been lying very low since Shorty Webb had been pulled in for questioning. *He* would need somewhere to hole up. And now Trilby Hat might feel obliged to take a powder—the car he was driving had certainly vanished—and he, too, would need a hidey-hole. As might Mr Fanworth, for that matter. H'm! That made three of 'em at least.

Inspector Higgins thoughtfully caressed his nether lip, wondering whether or not it might be wiser to alter his plan of campaign and raid the place in force. Then shrugged his shoulders. Anyone trying to *leave* this place in a hurry might find it extremely difficult. A raid in force would be a glorious fiasco if only the caretaker were found inside after all.

A moment later he quietly pushed open the spike-topped door and crept into the triangular yard; the pencil ray from his torch pin-pointed his way to the side door of the building as he carefully avoided the intervening litter. But the side door, instead of swinging gently open as he had expected, moved a bare inch and then seemed to stick. With a muttered imprecation he played the ray of his torch along the tiny crack at the foot of the door . . . and it was immediately apparent what the obstruction was. Somebody had used a chip from Anderson's heap of firewood as a wedge. And, although it would be a simple matter to force the door open, it was a cinch it could not be done in silence.

Inspector Higgins scowled. Was this Anderson's substitute for a key? Or, maybe, it was the others who . . .

The rumble of a distant train broke in on his thoughts and he grinned happily. He waited. The train neared. Then, as it thundered through the cutting behind the Hall, he levered the door open with his powerful shoulders, the protesting screech of the improvised wedge being merged in the general uproar. That was the theory, anyhow—but he tensed in case of accident. Then slowly relaxed as he realized that his entry had been undetected.

The passage beyond was in complete darkness; there was no semblance of light from the floor above the staircase ahead and . . . No. The darkness was not complete . . . there was the

tiniest glimmer . . . an apparent hole in the right-hand wall which . . . Jerusalem, yes! It was coming from the keyhole of the door leading to the Hall proper.

The briefest flash from his torch—a mere switch on and off—to assure himself that there was nothing in the way, and Higgins tiptoed his way towards the door. Then stooped.

It would have been better had the keyhole been as large as the one in the outer door; as it was, the scope of his vision was rather limited . . . albeit somewhat surprising. Anderson, the caretaker, sat cowering in a chair, blinking affrightedly into the ray of a torch which, presumably, was fixed somewhere—for the ray did not waver.

‘I—I tell you I don’t know a thing,’ he said, his eyes swivelling from side to side.

‘That’s what *you* say,’ said a cold voice, which sounded vaguely familiar to Higgins, though he could not place it. ‘And we’ve given you long enough to make up your mind.’

‘Too long,’ came a second voice.

Two of them, reflected Higgins.

‘So I think it is high time we—um—resorted to a little gentle persuasion,’ continued the first man.

‘I’ll say it is,’ echoed number two, his voice full of menace.

Anderson cringed in his chair. A hand appeared from nowhere and smacked his face.

And Inspector Higgins had had enough of it. He tried to push open the door but it failed to budge. At a guess one of the chairs had been propped under the handle. Nothing for it but to charge the door down. He took a preparatory backward step. An immediate elderly screech nearly made his hair stand on end. He stumbled backwards. There was a second yowl, more of outraged dignity than anguish, a splutter of sibilous venom, and, as the Beauty of Bangkok fled up the stairs, the door of the main hall was flung open.

As the cursing Higgins scrambled to his feet he had a brief view of the silhouette of the two men as they barged along the passage to the outer door. Why the hell hadn’t he wedged it again after he got in? They wouldn’t get far, anyhow. The moment they appeared in Newton Court young Brownall . . .

As Higgins reached the outer door a moment later, there

was a crunching of splintered wood from the triangular yard and he realized that the pair were not making for the spiked gate. It took him the barest fraction of a second to guess the answer. Hell and damnation! He might have *known* no gang would operate from a place with no secondary exit! He snagged his torch from his pocket and raced for the protective parapet with the railway line behind it.

A brief flash revealed the two men stumbling along the permanent way towards the end of the cutting; a moment later he, too, was over the top of the parapet.

'Hey, you!' he yelled in sheer exasperation at his own failure to plug this loophole—and his voice seemed to rebound from the opposite wall. Then he started to follow, at a jog-trot, between the near rail and the wall of the cutting. It was uneasy going. Twice he nearly tripped over the protruding end of a sleeper. Again he pulled his torch from his pocket to light his way, fully conscious that he might thus present an easy target but comforted by the thought that the men would probably never have bolted had they been armed.

He glanced ahead. Even as he did so, there seemed the barest flicker of movement which was immediately swallowed by the black mouth of the arched tunnel at the end of the cutting. A matter of seconds later and Higgins himself was edging his way along the tunnel, the fingers of his left hand brushing a wall which felt incredibly filthy with soot and grime, whilst his right hand flashed the ray of his torch ahead. And the ray seemed singularly ineffective, petering out into nothingness in a matter of yards and merely giving a faint reflection from the rails. It should help though, if either man tried to double on his tracks.

The side wall suddenly seemed to slip from his touch and he promptly swung his torch, which revealed a tiny bay in the brickwork. He pursed his lips. It occurred to him that there might be dozens of similar bays in the tunnel—in any of which the two might choose to hide. And, even as the thought arose, he realized that he could no longer hear any sound of movement in front.

He promptly put his torch back in his pocket and started to edge his way carefully along, straining his ears with each step forward. He heard a sound at last—but not exactly what he

had been listening for. It was the distant rumble of a train—coming from behind him.

He slewed his neck apprehensively . . . and a powerful weight caught him full on the chest.

He toppled backwards, instinctively grabbing for something to prevent his fall—and more or less surprised himself by pulling his assailant on top of him. The sudden impact of a railway sleeper in the small of his back nearly knocked all the breath out of him. His assailant, patently bent on escape, tried to crawl over him. Higgins jerked his knees upwards and the man let out a squeal of pain. The inspector rolled over, found he had a head in chancery and slammed home a large fist. A couple of seconds later he had disentangled himself from his inert assailant. He pulled out his torch.

The man was out, cold, with a large black kerchief loosely tied over his nose and mouth. A masked bandit, eh? Higgins snatched the thing away.

He had never seen the man before in his life, so it was a cinch it couldn't have been *his* voice which had sounded vaguely familiar. Higgins scowled in concentration. The feller would be out for quite a while. Long enough for the other chap to be caught? H'm! Better to tie him up. But what with? Of course. His own kerchief. Higgins swung his torch again. The kerchief had somehow blown between the rails. Higgins stepped over the near rail, stooped, then looked up aghast. It was the sudden onrush of air as the oncoming train burst into the mouth of the tunnel, rather than the noise it was making, which gave the warning and jerked the inspector back to realities. He flung himself on his face between the rails and cringed. The gargantuan monster roared over him. This was *it*. He'd almost asked for it. His sense of hearing had betrayed him. It had happened before. His mind flashed back to the time that car backed out of the courtyard at the club. He hadn't even heard that. And again it was when his blood was up. It was Kenton that time. Another scrap. That must be it. When he was mad clean through he must go deaf or something. Or was too preoccupied . . .

He opened his eyes at last—and was surprised to find that his torch was undamaged. But its ray was a very mixed

blessing. It emphasized if anything this ghastly nightmare. He was imprisoned in a cage of screaming wheels and axles and tubes and swinging chains . . . The noise was deafening. If one of those chains was hitched a link too low . . .

Higgins shuddered and cringed again at the thought. A second later he was conscious of a rallentando in the rhythmic rattling of the wheels. He sighed. Perhaps the train was pulling up. Perhaps he had been seen . . . or the man ahead had been seen . . . or . . .

Yes. It was definitely slowing . . . then became the merest crawl. From the head of the train came a prolonged whistle. He heard the distant impact of buffers, repeated accelerato as the impetus of succeeding trucks was stemmed by the truck in front; there was a metallic clang overhead and a continuation to the end of the train. Movement ceased momentarily and then the trucks began to roll backwards till pulled up short by the connecting chains.

The monster at last was still.

Higgins reached forward and grasped his torch. Between the wheels of the coach overhead he could see his recent assailant still out to the world—but couldn't care less.

The inspector took a deep breath. It shouldn't take him half a second to scramble between the wheels. And if the train chose that psychological moment to get on the move again . . . ? Higgins ruefully admitted to himself that he hadn't even the guts to try.

His best bet was to crawl to the end of the coach or truck or whatever it was overhead, where there should be more space for a suicidal scramble to safety. Or wait, of course, until the train completely passed over him. Yet, if he had been seen, surely the engine driver or guard or somebody should by this time be making some sort of investigation. But there was no sound of movement of any sort—merely the screech of escaping steam from the head of the train. The signals were probably against it—that was why the train had stopped.

Inspector Higgins crawled forward. His torch revealed the end of the coach. The fact that there was no connecting corridor overhead seemed to suggest that this was a goods train after all. Between the pairs of buffers were three taut

links of a mighty chain. And there didn't seem much more room here to scramble through than there was between the wheels. Might be a better bet to try to get on top of the truck first and then jump to safety. If only he had the courage to straighten upright and . . .

A second later he was on his feet, squeezing between the coupling chain and a pair of buffers.

And a warning whistle from the engine suggested it was about to move. Higgins scrambled on to the chain, clawed the top of the truck and hauled himself upwards just as the train jerked forward.

He dropped into an empty truck and blew out his cheeks.

'Turned out nice agen,' he muttered.

One thing, he couldn't hope to jump to safety till they were clear of this blasted tunnel. And by that time the train would probably be going too fast even to try!

Jerusalem! Vvnat a mess!

The train picked up speed—and Higgins suddenly swore. He had overlooked a bet. What he ought immediately to have done was to lean over the side of the truck and play his torch on the tunnel. He *might* have been lucky enough to spot the second man as the train sped past. And even had the man been masked as the other had been, there was a remote chance Higgins would have recognized him. His voice was vaguely familiar, anyhow. Too late now, though.

And what would be happening at the Hall of the Clear Thinkers? It was fairly certain that Anderson, the caretaker there, wouldn't say a word. He'd be only too glad the pair had left in a hurry. And young Brownall would stay put until something happened. And if nothing happened . . . Hell! Why the deuce hadn't he blown his whistle before barging over that parapet? Higgins blew out his cheeks again in sheer disgust at his own incompetence. He'd never live this down. It would provide the Yard with a stock laugh for years . . . particularly if the first stop was China, which seemed likely from the lick they were going now.

Was there anything he could possibly do about it? For all he knew there was a quarter of a mile of trucks in front of him and perhaps as much behind, but he'd go crackers if he merely stayed where he was. Forward or back? The guard

at the end surely had some means of halting the train. The driver certainly had. H'm! Forward then. But he would have to wait until the train was clear of this tunnel—the roof seemed painfully close.

He had not long to wait. And he rather surprised himself by the ease with which he crossed to the truck in front. This, too, was empty. As was the next. Hell! Surely they'd come to a station soon, where he might be able to signal with his torch.

They did. But the station was in complete darkness. Higgins cursed again.

This was too dam' silly for words. Even supposing he reached the leading truck there might be a coal tender between that and the engine. Still, he could waggle his torch and more or less *will* the driver or fireman to look behind instead of in front.

He sighed; climbed up the side of the truck and jumped to the next.

And there, staring with blank dismay into the ray of his torch, was a very dishevelled, exceedingly dirty, hatless gentleman.

'Well, well, well,' said Higgins happily. 'If it isn't our Mr Oakfield, the famous amateur thug.'

Chapter Fifteen

SURPRISE

OAKFIELD gasped as he recognized the inspector's voice. 'But—but I thought . . .' he stammered—and broke off.

'Quite. You thought I didn't see you when you clambered aboard, eh?' Inspector Higgins, somewhat cock-a-hoop at having fortuitously salvaged something from the wreck, very nearly convinced himself that he *had* done so. 'You were forgetting that you were up against a—um—mere inspector, weren't you?'

'I—I didn't know *who* you were. I thought . . .' And again Oakfield left the sentence uncompleted.

'You thought what?'

'Never *you* mind.'

'Oh, but I *do*. I *said* we hadn't finished with you yet. You and I are going to have a little chat.'

'I'm saying nothing.'

'Well, well. In that case I think it is high time I resorted to a little—um—gentle persuasion. I—um—*think* that was your phrase, wasn't it?'

Oakfield glowered into the ray of the torch.

'You're welcome to try. And in any case you daren't I'd report you.'

The inspector laughed a fat laugh. 'Well, well. You must think I'm humping a portable tele-recorder about with me or something. You can report as much as you like. I shall simply deny it. Now then. Talk and talk fast. And if you care to think I'm bluffing—well, that's up to you.' His voice took on a deeper timbre; the pseudo-banter was gone. 'What were you doing in that chapel place?'

Oakfield remained mumchance. Higgins took a couple of steps forward. 'This is for Anderson,' he said—and slapped the man's face . . . which immediately drained of all semblance of colour. And the inspector snorted in s'eer disgust, for

the man's face was not pallid through sudden rage but was blanched by fear. Hell! He hadn't the guts of a louse. And with Higgins himself practically one-handed, being cumbered with the flash-lamp, a man of spirit might have made a go of it. H'm! Probably expected to be crowned with it or summat. The inspector waggled the torch for emphasis. 'I asked what you were doing in that chapel place,' he said in a menacing tone of voice.

'N-nothing.'

'H'm! I wonder if that caretaker there thinks the same. Come along now, Oakfield. Where do you fit in in the set-up?'

'I—I don't know what you mean.'

'You wouldn't like me to get real rough, would you?'

'I—I demand a lawyer.'

'I don't think there's one on the train, somehow. I'm afraid you'll have to do without. Like Anderson had to—if you see what I mean.' Inspector Higgins sniffed. 'Well?' he demanded.

'I—I wanted to find out what was—was going on there,' Oakfield blurted out at last.

Higgins frowned in the darkness. The reply was most unexpected . . . and the man seemed in too much of a blue funk to extemporize. 'As if you didn't *know*,' growled Higgins.

'I—I didn't. Honest, I didn't.'

'H'm! And if Anderson *had* known anything—what then?'

'I—I should have told the police.'

'Oh, yeah? And why should you think it was a police matter? Who put you on to the chapel in the first place?'

'I—I followed Tatham there once.'

Higgins blinked. 'So you know Tough Tatham, do you?'

'I—I didn't know he was called Tough.'

'He is, you know. And, believe me, he *is* tough. And is that who you thought had caught up with you when I arrived on the scene?' Inspector Higgins emitted a deep chuckle. 'Thank your lucky stars it wasn't. You'd be dead meat by now.' He paused. Then: 'So what it boils down to is this: You were on the snoop, eh? Looking for some stray pickings. What was the main idea? Blackmail or hi-jacking? You had it in mind once before, didn't you? When

you saw Langley with that gun. If you *did* see him with it.'

'I did. I did. I—I told Mr Brownall I did.'

'Mr Brownall, eh? No longer a mere sergeant. And who was your pal? Oh, of course. It was Unwin, wasn't it? I ought to have guessed that before. Well, if it's any consolation to you, your pal Unwin is also feeling very sorry for himself at this moment. Now tell me. What is your interest in Collier Close?'

'C-Collier Close?'

'Don't act dumb. You went there once. You remember. That time you *didn't* use the back exit from the Rosemary Residential Club.'

'But—but . . . I mean . . . I . . .'

'Surprises you, don't it? And you and Unwin occasionally talk about the place, don't you? Believe me, Oakfield,' continued the inspector in a very sepulchral voice, 'we've been keeping an eye on you for a very, very long time.' Higgins really sounded most convincing, almost omniscient. 'Come along now. Collier Close.'

'It—it was Tatham again.'

Before the inspector could make further comment the train perceptibly slowed. Higgins peered over the top of the truck. So far as he could tell in the darkness they were in the middle of nowhere. When the train eventually stopped he was sure of it. He could see the dim outline of distant trees and there did not seem to be any signs of human habitation whatever. Not a glimmer of light or silhouette of a building. If he forced Oakfield to get off here they'd probably have to hike it for miles before they got anywhere. He'd be worse off than if he stayed. Still . . .

But the train started again before Higgins had had time to make up his mind on the point. A light did slide by, but it was only an isolated signal-box. Higgins could see the operator peering out of his door. Then all was dark again.

The inspector turned, swung the ray of his torch and let out a yell. 'Hey!'

And Oakfield, who had clambered almost on to the side of the truck, released his hold as though it were red hot and dropped again to the floor of the truck. Higgins clucked his tongue censoriously. 'Don't you know it's dangerous to

alight from a moving train?' he asked. 'Besides. I haven't finished with you yet.'

Oakfield tried to shield his eyes from the blinding ray of the inspector's torch. 'I—I—you can't do anything to me. I—I haven't done anything. I . . .'

'Shut up, will you! Now then. What do you know of Shorty Webb?'

'Shorty Webb? I've never—never even heard of him.'

'I'm! And Kenton?'

'Kenton? Do you mean the man who—who works at the club?'

'That's right.'

'W-well. That's all I *do* know about him.'

Such was the expression of surprise on Oakfield's face at the turn of the questioning that Higgins was half inclined to believe him.

'And what about Mr Fanworth?' he asked.

'Mr Fanworth? The clock man?' Oakfield actually managed a weak watery sort of half smile. 'I think he's crackers,' he said.

Inspector Higgins grunted. That had been *his* original opinion. There was a long silence. Then: 'Let's see if I've got this straight,' he said. 'Apparently you and Unwin got the idea that there might be something fishy going on—and decided to do a little investigating on your own. Why, doesn't matter—though I can guess,' darkly. 'And so far you have uncovered the Hall of the Clear Thinkers and Collier Close—though where that fits in is anybody's guess. And you've been snooping about for some time, haven't you? And providing your own excuses for doing so. No billiards chalk, for one thing—and bursting in on Langley to see what might be going on. And today the lights—er—fused . . . and you snoop in on Mr Quenlock to see who *he's* talking to. It must have been quite a shock to learn his visitor was from the Yard. And you have the temerity to tangle with Tough Tatham.' Higgins snorted derisively. 'Yet it never seems to have occurred to either of you that you might be mixing yourselves up with murder. Or did it?'

'M-murder?' Oakfield peered goggle-eyed into the darkness.

'M'yes. Langley was probably murdered.'

'But—but I thought . . .'

'And you were one of the last people to see him.'

'B-but I didn't kill him. I didn't even touch that gun.'

'And Cockell was murdered, too,' continued the inspector inexorably.

'C-Cockell?'

'Yes. Your old snooker pal. He . . .' Higgins broke off. Oakfield's eyes had suddenly glazed; his knees buckled, his back slithered along the side of the truck and he collapsed in a dead faint at the inspector's feet. And, almost as though it had been a signal to the driver, the train at that precise moment began to lose speed.

Inspector Higgins swore beneath his breath. This was a helluva time for Oakfield to throw a flop! He glanced over the top of the truck. Yes. They were certainly nearing a township of sorts. He stuck his head over the side and peered ahead. In the distance was a dimly lighted station with other moving lights on the platform. Looked as though this might be their destination.

A sigh from the floor of the truck and Higgins glanced down again. Oakfield was coming round. The inspector pulled him to a sitting posture and then thrust his head between his knees.

'Don't. You're hurting me.'

The inspector eased the pressure. Oakfield sat up of his own volition. There was a series of toots from the whistle of the train—whether in warning to someone on the line or as a signal of arrival Higgins could not tell—and then the train slowed to a crawl and finally stopped.

And a second later the truck was bathed in the light from a couple of powerful hand-lamps held high from the platform.

'Here they are,' said a gruff voice. 'There's a couple of 'em.' Then: 'All right you two. You can come along out of it just as quick as you like.' And a helmeted head appeared over the side. A moment afterwards two uniformed constables jumped to the floor of the truck.

As a matter of fact the explanation was perfectly simple. The inspector's free use of his torch from an open truck had not passed unnoticed by the driver and fireman of the train. At the first convenient signal-box the driver had halted his train to report the unauthorized passengers. The signalman had telephoned ahead and the local police, with commendable promptitude, had turned out to arrest the intruders.

The fact that one of them was a detective-inspector from Scotland Yard was in the nature of an anti-climax. Higgins felt almost sorry for the local men.

'In any case I'm mighty glad to see you,' he said at last. Then, thinking that a little of the old oil wouldn't come amiss: 'A first-class piece of work. Efficiency of the highest order. What we—um—expect but don't always get. Congratulations.' He coughed. 'I—um—wonder if you could give me and this feller a lift back to the Yard?'

'Delighted, sir. Delighted. Is he—er—dangerous?'

Inspector Higgins grinned. 'I doubt it, son. I doubt it.' He jerked an imperative thumb and Oakfield, still more or less in a daze, made his dejected way to a police car which was parked outside the station, with the inspector bringing up the rear.

On the whole, Higgins was well satisfied with the turn of events. With a little judicious sub-editing his involuntary journey by truck could be made to appear a most meritorious example of tenacity of purpose. Higgins the redoubtable gets his man—come hell or high water. There'd be no question now of providing the Yard with a stock laugh for years. If anything . . . He emitted a chuckle of self-derision. Much more of this and he'd convince himself that he had deliberately signalled to the driver of the train to contact that signalman!

It was not until the police car neared Harlbury that he was reminded of the second man who had fled into the tunnel there. Jerusalem! It wouldn't be so hot if Unwin, whilst still in a daze, had walked into an oncoming train; though it wouldn't matter a hoot if he escaped—for he would certainly roll up at the Rosemary Club tomorrow morning as though nothing had happened. He, like the miserable Oakfield here, wouldn't know it had been the police on his tail.

The inspector frowned in indecision, then leaned forward

to the two officers on the front seats. 'Perhaps you will drop us here,' he said. 'I—um—mustn't take you too far away from your base.'

'It's no trouble at all, sir. Won't take us much longer to go to the Yard.'

'Thank you very much. But here will do nicely.'

'As you wish, sir.' And the car drew to a halt in Harlbury High Street.

Inspector Higgins and Oakfield alighted. The inspector beamed through the near window. 'Thank you very much, gentlemen,' he said. 'And I will personally write to your senior officer expressing my appreciation of your co-operation. Who is he, by the way?'

'That would be Superintendent Goodman, sir.' The officer's voice sounded extremely unctuous.

Inspector Higgins blinked. 'You mean Superintendent Goodman of the Frantshire Police?'

'That's right, sir. We picked you up at the edge of the county.'

'Jerusalem, my happy home!'

The inspector suddenly *knew* where Cockell's body had been dumped into that empty truck. Dammit! Superintendent Goodman himself had told him that a sliver of wood and a rusty nail had been found in the turn-ups of Cockell's trousers. And there were traces of sour soil on the man's clothing. Hell! It stood out a mile!

Cockell had been murdered in that triangular yard abutting the Hall of the Clear Thinkers. His body had then been dumped on a passing train. Anyone with any brains would have tumbled to this years ago!

Chapter Sixteen

DISCOVERY

THE phase of masterly inactivity in connexion with the Hall of the Clear Thinkers was now definitely in the discard, for it was patent that, if Cockell had been murdered in the adjacent yard, there was scarcely the remotest chance that the gang would be using the Hall again. It was ironical to think that, but for the inquisitive intervention of Oakfield and Unwin, the discreet official watch on the premises might have gone on for days in the still-born hope that the gang might return there. It would seem that Oakfield and his pal had unwittingly done the police a good turn.

Sergeant Brownall, waiting patiently in the darkened doorway of No. 1, Newton Court, was frankly bored, and was doing his level best to stifle a rising indignation against his chief. Why the deuce didn't old Higgy *do* something. If the whole business was a false alarm why didn't he come out again and say so? Then they could both get back to bed. Such was his faith in his chief that not for one moment did he imagine that anything could have gone wrong in the Hall at the end of the Court. And as no one had come out of the place what on earth did old Higgy think he was up to? Having a good kip, as like as not, reflected the sergeant darkly.

'Oh, there you are, are you?' boomed a voice from the darkness.

Brownall turned swiftly. 'G-golly, sir. I thought you . . . How did you get out? I . . .'

'Joke over,' said Higgins. 'I've told Indall to tell the others.'

'You mean it's all a wash-out, sir?'

'More or less. It was just a little comic interlude by your old pal Oakfield.'

'Oakfield, sir? I'll swear he didn't come out this way.'

'He didn't. We—um—took a roundabout route.' The inspector sniffed expressively. 'I'm surprised that *you* never thought of the railway running behind the place.'

'You—you mean that Oakfield . . .'

'Yes. It was a bit o' luck that *I* didn't overlook the possibility.' And the inspector gave his expurgated version of recent happenings.

'And you let Oakfield *go*?' said the sergeant when Higgins had finished, his voice expressing sheer incredulity.

'Yes. Sorry to rob you of a gloat but we can always get him when we want him. If it's any consolation to you, he's probably just realized that the last train's gone and he's got to walk back.' The inspector chuckled happily. 'And now, son, we've got work to do.'

Two minutes later the pair were once more in the triangular yard of the H.M.'s of the Clear Thinkers. Again the inspector climbed the parapet and vanished in the darkness, to return in due course with a black kerchief in his hand. 'Well, son,' he said as he dropped back into the yard, 'Unwin seems to have made it. We can only hope he won't be scraped off a train tomorrow morning.' He stuffed the kerchief in his pocket. 'Now then. Let's see what we can find here.' He played the ray of his torch round the litter of the yard. 'I'm afraid the trail's as cold as Saturday's bacon.'

'There's plenty of marks where someone's climbed the parapet, sir.'

'M'yes. Mostly made tonight, at a guess. What we want are bloodstains—and after all this time the evidence will probably be analytical rather than visual. There seem to be plenty of slivers of wood with nails in 'em. It's easy to see how one got into Cockell's turn-up. Particularly if he was dragged along the ground and . . . H'm! You saw his boots at Frant, son. Remember if there were any scratches on the toes or heels?'

'I didn't notice, sir. We can phone up and ask.'

'M'yes. And after all this time any marks on the ground . . .'

Higgins broke off and played the ray of his torch in wide sweeps along the space. He had just recollected that this yard had been left severely alone by the gang for some time. There was still a chance that . . . Of course, Anderson had

used the yard since . . . and Oakfield and Unwin . . . 'Let's roust out Anderson,' he said. And made for the door to the building.

The caretaker needing no 'rousting' out. It was quite patent that he had been shivering behind the door in trepidation ever since the police officers had been in the yard. His relief at discovering who his visitors were was almost comic.

'Lumme, mister. I—I thought as how you was those two come back agen.'

'H'm! I don't somehow think you'll see either of 'em again, Anderson. Had you met them before?'

'No, mister. They kep' arsting me what was a goin' on like. And I didn't know what . . .'

'I understand. I understand. Now think, Anderson. How long have you had your cat?'

'About six weeks, mister.'

'And when did you last have a—um—visit from your friends?'

'I told you, mister. I haven't seed 'em for weeks.'

'But they came again after you'd got your cat, surely?'

'Yes, mister. They musta done. It was a fortnight afterwards. I was out and didn't get back till late.'

Higgins gravely nodded his head. A fortnight afterwards would make it a month ago—and Cockell had been missing a month. 'It fitted all right. 'How did you know they'd been if you didn't see them?' he asked.

'Why, mister, they left me some more boxes.'

'They what?' Inspector Higgins again swung his torch round the triangular yard.

'Boxes, mister. I was supposed to burn 'em.' His face lit up with a crafty grin. 'But I useter chop 'em up and flog 'em for firewood.'

'H'm! I suppose it never occurred to you they might be hot?'

'Hot, mister? Who would want to pinch a lot o' empty boxes?'

The inspector sighed. 'The presumption is, rather, that they were full when they got here. I suppose you didn't notice any of the markings on the boxes?'

'But I told you, mister. I—I can't read.'

Higgins glumly nodded his head and crossed the yard to a

sodden cardboard carton—but any markings thereon there might have been had rotted away. He swung his torch to another and peered more closely. Apparently the carton had once contained four dozen tins of salmon. He frowned and turned to Sergeant Brownall. 'Salmon, son. That seems to ring some sort of bell,' he muttered.

'Thames River Police, sir,' responded Brownall brightly. 'Hundreds of cartons knocked off from a loaded barge. We were asked to keep an eye open for 'em.'

'That's right, son. I remember now. Pinched from a moored barge in one of the docks. And chests of tea and boxes of . . .' He broke off; then leered at the sergeant. 'Can *you* think of any likely thug with a hole-up by the river?' he asked knowingly.

'Golly, sir. Tough Tatham. Of the Water Rat.'

Higgins nodded his head. 'It stands out a mile, don't it? Oakfield said he followed Tatham here—though Tatham must have been half asleep to let him. And we know Tatham was in Harlbury here when he used that phone in the High Street. H'm! We'll have a squad here in the morning and try to piece together some of Anderson's firewood. We may get a clue to other jobs. This place here seems to have been a sort of clearing house.' He turned to the waiting caretaker. 'We're pushing off, Anderson,' he said. 'Mind you look after that cat o' yours.'

'Trust me, mister. She won't go far.'

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The night duty officer-in-charge of the Thames River Police depot grinned broadly when Inspector Higgins and Sergeant Brownall entered his brightly lit office. The inspector's puzzled scowl seemed a pretty ungracious response.

'What's the joke?' he asked gruffly.

'You are, Higgy. Been in the wars or something?'

And for the first time Higgins realized what an unkempt state he was in and smiled ruefully. After all, you couldn't play rough-and-tumble on railway sleepers and in empty trucks without a certain amount of superficial damage to the clothing.

The officer's prompt ministrations with a clothes-brush reminded Higgins of the similar services rendered by Mr Fanworth after that one-sided scrap with Kenton. People seemed to like tidying him up. And whilst the officer plied the brush Higgins stated the reason for the call.

'Those barge thefts, Higgy? They're on the increase, I'm afraid. There seems to be a gang about who specialize in that sort o' thing. And we can't be in all places at once. As for that salmon business, a fairly sizeable boat might have been used.'

'And I imagine there's a fair sized boat belonging to the Water Rat,' observed the inspector.

The officer temporarily ceased his operations to stare into the inspector's face. Slowly he shook his head from side to side and smiled. 'Tough Tatham's got a boat, all right,' he said. 'But, believe me, Higgy, we've had it—and the Water Rat—under very close observation for weeks. And the night that salmon was lifted there was *no* activity from the Water Rat. You can bet your bottom dollar on that.' He flicked the brush down the inspector's lapels. '*Should* there have been?' he asked.

'I rather think so.'

The officer again shook his head in doubt. 'I think Tough Tatham is lying very low these days. Retired, if you ask me. The nearest we got to any sort of clue over that salmon business was much farther up-stream from the Water Rat. It was an empty carton, to be exact, which was floating on the river. And in any case the tide was wrong for it to have got there from the Water Rat. After all, Collier Wharf must be all of three miles from . . .'

'What place was that?' Higgins stiffened and stared.

'Collier Wharf. I . . .'

'Anywhere near Collier Close?'—a peremptory query from the inspector.

'Same place, practically. The warehouses . . .'

'Jerusalem, my happy home.' Higgins stared into space. Collier Close. Dammit, the very name should have suggested some *river* connexion! He scowled in deep concentration into the officer's surprised face. 'Could you possibly run us down to the wharf?' he asked at last.

'Can do, I suppose. What's the big idea?'

'That's all it is, old man. A big idea.'

Three minutes later a powerful police launch pulled away from the jetty. The officer-in-charge waved a friendly hand in valedictory salute. Higgins pulled up the collar of his jacket; it was very bleak on the water. The silhouettes of the buildings on either bank seemed to slide silently by. There was one feverish spot of activity under naphtha flares where dockers were loading or unloading a vessel tied to a wharf and then this, too, was left behind. The inspector sniffed. *His* salary was fixed; there was no double pay for night-work so far as he was concerned. And what was he doing here, anyway? He wasn't even working on one of Brownall's hunches. It was merely . . .

'Shall I flood-light Collier Wharf, sir?' asked a voice. 'We're practical' 'there.'

'Righto.'

There was an immediate powerful beam from the bow of the launch, almost blinding in its sudden intensity, which swept along the shore to focus on a warehouse wall some forty feet from the edge of the jetty; the engine of the launch shuddered in reverse; as the launch slewed the beam wavered, momentarily missed its target and then pin-pointed a car to the side of the warehouse. Even from this distance it was patent the car was a dark Ocelot; a second later Higgins could decipher its registration number. Jerusalem! It was Fanworth's car.

In a matter of seconds he and the sergeant had scrambled on the jetty and were running towards the car.

So this was where it had been hidden all the time—no wonder the mobile police had been unable to find it. Trilby Hat must have driven it here straight from the club. It could have been out of sight almost before the patrol cars had been looking for it.

It was not even locked. There was no one inside—not that Higgins had expected that there *would* be!—and the engine was stone cold. The fact that the off rear door was partly open seemed to suggest that the car had been abandoned in a hurry. And Trilby Hat had lost a second hand gear, for his peaked cap was on the driver's seat.

The glass of the clock on the dashboard was shattered but the clock was still going. Higgins grinned at the thought that it was still capable of being regulated with a certain nicety of precision. Fanworth *would* be pleased . . . if he ever had the chance!

And thinking of Fanworth . . . Inspector Higgins stared at the speedometer on the dashboard and read the figure of total mileage. He remembered what Miss Langley had told the sergeant . . . and how distraught Fanworth had seemed after discovering that his prodigious memory for figures had let him down. Or had it? Might not his consternation have been caused by the fact that his car had been driven about forty-nine miles without his knowledge? It *could* be, of course. And that would mean that he was unaware that his car had been used on the occasion of that wage snatch in the West End. From which it followed that Mr Fanworth might, after all, be mother's little white-haired boy.

The inspector frowned. That indeed took some swallowing. But if it *were* true, then Trilby Hat—the moment he realized he had been recognized by the inspector when entering the car—would have made for Collier Close and . . . And what?

Inspector Higgins turned quickly to stare at the rear seats of the car, looking for some sign that Fanworth had been attacked whilst sitting there. That might account for the cracked glass of the dashboard clock . . . Trilby Hat pulls in here, turns suddenly, clambers over the driving seat (kicking in the glass on the way) and . . .

Higgins shook his head. Not a sign of anything untoward. No. Fanworth must be in this business all right—he had left this car of his own volition . . . And where had the pair gone from here? The inspector turned, shielded his eyes from the searchlight beam from the launch, and stared at nothing in particular. Seemingly he had the whole expanse of the River Thames to choose from.

And even whilst he stared, from somewhere close to hand came a muffled scream.

'G-golly,' said Sergeant Brownall.

'Hell,' said Higgins—and started to run towards the warehouse building.

Chapter Seventeen

CAPTURE

IT was quickly apparent that the building had not been used—at least legitimately—for years. Such windows as faced the river were boarded up; wide doors at ground level were apparently nailed secure by criss-cross boarding; above, flush with the wall, was the arm of a crane with a rusty dangling chain of heavy links, which seemingly had not been operated for a decade; high up on the wall was a jutting platform which formed the threshold of the closed double doors above it . . . All spot-lit by the searchlight from the launch.

Higgins took all this in in one quick glance. Then swore again.

'Blast it, Brownall. That car. It must have got here somehow.' He ran back to the car and pulled out his torch. Yes. There were tire marks where the car had been driven . . . and another tunnel similar to that from the courtyard of the Rosemary Club. At the end was a wide closed door, patently leading to Collier Close beyond.

Half-way through the tunnel was a side door to the warehouse, with another opposite. Substantial doors. Higgins looked from one to the other in indecision. Then tried both. Neither budged.

'Son,' he said, 'slip back to the car and see if there's a tire lever knocking about. We must . . .' He broke off. The beam from the launch had suddenly vanished, intensifying the darkness it left behind. 'What the blazes is up now?' he asked of the world at large. The ray from his own torch seemed singularly puny; the diminishing sound of the launch's engines sheer desertion. Higgins swore beneath his breath, remembering that he had only asked for a lift to the wharf. They probably thought that was all he *did* want. He pulled himself together. 'Tire lever, son,' he said—and turned to survey the right-hand door. It would take a neck of a lot of

breaking in. The left-hand door looked equally formidable. Blast. You paid your money and took your choice. With an even chance of guessing wrong. He could do with another muffled scream to tip the balance.

Then he tensed and doused the flash-light. There was a scraping sound from behind the door on the right . . . a metallic noise . . . Well, well, well! Somebody was trying to release a refractory bolt from its socket, seemingly. Higgins grinned in the darkness. He'd just wait until the bolt was clear and the door-catch released and then he'd slam the door open with a large foot—and if he knocked out someone's front teeth in the process it would be just too bad. No. Better not go off at half-cock again. It was *just* possible it was the person who had screamed who was fiddling with the bolt. H'm!

The noise ceased. Then there was a creak which suggested the door-catch had been freed and the door was beginning to open. Higgins, his thumb on the button of his flash, stood grimly immobile in the darkness.

'I'm sorry, sir,' called Sergeant Brownall. 'But I can't . . .'

Higgins lunged a foot forward the fraction of a second before the door slammed upon it; the door did not quite close and Higgins applied his huge shoulder in leverage. His foot began to slip under the pressure from behind the door. 'Brownall, you chump,' he yelled—and the sergeant came galloping up.

Under their combined weight the door budged a couple of inches and Higgins slid his foot into the resultant crack. One thing. They'd never shut it now. 'Put some guts into it, son,' gasped the inspector, straining every muscle.

'I *am*, sir,' in panting indignation.

Another inch or two were gained and then the door stuck once more, and refused to move. Whoever was the other side had somehow managed to wedge it . . . which meant as near stalemate as dammit. Unless, of course, the wedge was merely an old-fashioned boot with a heavy man inside it.

A saturnine smile crossed the inspector's face as he fingered the lapel of his jacket. He eased his arm carefully through the open wedge of the door and groped; his fingers touched the cloth of a trouser leg. He jabbed the pin into the leg behind it.

There was a sudden yell and the door crashed open. Brownall and Higgins incontinently sprawled to the floor . . . a natural corollary which the inspector had omitted from his calculations: Moreover he had dropped his torch. As he grovelled on the floor to retrieve it he could hear the sound of hasty retreat as feet thundered across the room. A distant door was flung open, throwing a widening wedge of light which revealed the room to be of sizeable dimensions. He had a brief view of the silhouette of a large man as he scampered through the opening, with Brownall at his heels. The door slammed but was promptly clawed open again by the sergeant. Abandoning his flash-lamp Higgins dashed in pursuit.

The room beyond was also big, but was cluttered with packing-cases; the only illumination was from an oil hurricane lamp perched on one of the cases. A line of brand new bicycles leaned against the right-hand wall, along which the man was running—patently making for a skeleton staircase, with no handrail or balustrade, which ran up the opposite wall. He reached the foot of the staircase and snatched at the last bicycle as he passed, toppling the entire line; the resultant crash was accentuated as Brownall tripped and sprawled on top of it.

The inspector took a running jump to the top of a packing-case and from thence to the staircase, a third of the way up, by-passing the barrier of cycles and almost on the heels of the man in front. It took him all of a second to regain his balance, and then he barged up the remaining stairs. The floor above was in darkness. He stood momentarily in indecision at the top of the stairs, listening for the sound of movement; suddenly he realized he must be a sitting target in bold relief even from the dim light from the lamp below. With the thought he promptly ducked. A mighty arm swung above his head, a huge chest hit him in the face; such was the impetus of the fortuitous miss that the man stumbled forward, sweeping the inspector off his feet. He squirmed to one side as the pair of them hit the topmost stair and began to slither down. Sergeant Brownall, who by this time was half-way up the flight, could do nothing about it. A couple of seconds later all three were at the foot of the stairs among the bicycles.

The man tore himself from the inspector's grasp; Brownall was completely tangled in a cycle frame. Higgins scrambled to his feet, leapt over a cycle which seemed no longer new and hit the floor with such force that the light from the hurricane lamp flickered—and vanished.

'Light, Brownall. Light,' he roared and crept furtively in the darkness among the packing-cases, cursing the fact that he had failed to retrieve his own torch a short while before.

Brownall obliged. The ray of his flash-lamp swept round the room. Higgins blinked. The feller couldn't possibly have vanished into thin air . . . Then he heard the sound of laboured breathing from behind a pile of cases—and was half tempted to push the lot over. He crept forward, grabbed.

There was a sudden yell of surprise. Higgins jerked the man into the light; the man slowly raised his arms above his head.

'Cussed if it ain't Mr Kenton,' said Higgins happily, as Sergeant Brownall advanced towards them. 'Now I wonder what you're doing here?'

The handyman of the Rosemary Residential Club remained mumchance; it was quite patent that he had remembered the scrap in the courtyard of the place and had no wish for further hostilities. He was unshaven and unkempt; there was fear in his eyes. Higgins tapped him on the chest with a large menacing forefinger. 'A short while ago someone screamed,' he said. 'I much doubt if it was you. And I have no wish to open *all* these cases. So if you will just indicate which case is the one we want . . .'

'Stand still the lot of you,' said a cold voice from the direction of the door . . . and a still, blinding ray from a powerful torch lit up the tableau. Inspector Higgins momentarily froze then slowly turned, judging distance. He had not the slightest doubt that the new-comer was armed and . . . Jerusalem! And so was *he*, if it came to that! Until this very moment he had completely forgotten indenting for the police automatic before setting out for Harlbury. His hand edged towards his hip pocket. There was a flash of flame, an almost simultaneous twitch at the sleeve of the inspector's jacket and a thud as the bullet hit the wall behind him. 'Don't try that again,' counselled the voice. 'Believe me, from this distance

it's harder to miss than to hit. I shan't miss twice. Demonstration is much more effective than asseveration, don't you think? If you're wise you'll stay perfectly still.'

Higgins decided to be wise. There was little else he *could* do, save staring into that unwavering ray and try to assess the height of the man. The voice, as a voice, was useless. It was patently disguised, delivered in a monotone, without inflexion or cadence. The choice of words, though not beyond his vocabulary, rather militated against the man being Tough Tatham—though Tatham might be slick enough to realize this. Trilby Hat, then? 'Asseveration' was probably outside his range of language. Unwin? Higgins had never even heard him speak. Then what about Fanworth? *He* rather liked to hear himself talk and . . .

'Kenton!' said the man.

'Y-yes, boss'

Boss, eh? We're getting somewhere at last.

'I think perhaps you had better relieve the—um—stouter gentleman'—Higgins bridled at the calumny—'of his artillery. It's in his hip pocket, at a guess. And it is to be hoped he will not object. That would be just too bad—for him! And—um—don't get between us, will you? That would be too bad—for you!' Then a sudden snarl. 'Get on with it, will you! We haven't all night.'

'Y-yes, boss.'

Inspector Higgins writhed mentally—and almost physically—as Kenton's hand eased the automatic from his pocket.

'That's right. Now take the other gentleman's torch—and douse it. He's been trying hard to focus it on me but it's not strong enough to counteract this one here. And we don't want any accidents, do we? That's right. Now bring them to me. And—um—keep well out of the line of fire.'

Kenton, torch in one hand and automatic in the other, edged affrightedly along the line of packing-cases and vanished behind that powerful ray.

'Thank you, Kenton. Now you can slip out and start up the car. Give me a toot when all is in readiness.' The man's voice dropped; his words became indistinguishable. Inspector Higgins tensed. He had a strong suspicion that both were making towards the outer door. 'No, no, no,' came the

strident voice from behind the ray. 'I haven't gone yet. In fact I shan't be going for . . .'—a slight pause—'for exactly three minutes.'

Then silence. Higgins breathed deeply. Well, well, well. So it was Mr Fanworth, was it? The whale for time. The inspector, in happier circumstances, would have been prepared to lay a hundred to six that the tiny break in the last sentence had been occasioned by the shooting of a cuff and the glancing at a luminous dial.

And now what? Unless Fanworth were prepared to shoot the pair of them, what hopes had he of getting away? Jerusalem! He had every chance, once he reached the car. For Higgins had just remembered that he had arrived here by police launch and that his own car was by the Thames River Police depot. Hell! Not so hot. It would have to be a do or die effort the moment Kenton tooted his horn. Young Brownall alongside would surely twig. If the pair of them made a concerted rush surely one or the other . . .

That blinding ray seemed extraordinarily still and . . . The sudden toot of a klaxon and Higgins ducked and dived. There was a flash of flame from the doorway, the spat of a bullet; the ray jerked drunkenly and vanished; the smashed torch clattered to the floor; the room was in utter darkness.

Higgins crashed against a packing-case and immediately lost his sense of direction; a second later he seemed to be knee-deep in bicycles. He swore roundly and groped in his pocket for his cigarette lighter. This was sheer *opéra bouffe*. 'Where the hell are you, Brownall?' he roared as he rubbed his thumb on the wheel of his lighter and held the tiny flame aloft.

'This way, sir.' Brownall had almost reached the door.

Higgins picked his way after him, paused at the doorway to pick up the flash-lamp he had dropped there, and rushed into the arched tunnel. The gates to Collier Close were now wide open. The inspector turned, flashed his torch. The Fanworth car had gone. And Higgins promptly relaxed and grinned.

'Well, well, son,' he observed happily. 'How far do you think that car'll get, with all our boys already looking for it?' Then his face sobered and he grunted. 'H'm! You'd better slip along to a kiosk and phone headquarters. They

don't know that Fanworth's armed—and dangerous. Better warn 'em. On your way. I . . .'

And again, from somewhere close at hand, came a muffled scream. A repeat performance, as it were. But this time the inspector was better able to locate its direction. His immediate reaction was to direct his torch upwards to the roof of the tunnel, at which he scowled uncertainly. Let's think. Yes. That skeleton staircase . . . the room to which it led probably extended over this tunnel and . . .

'All right, son. I'll attend to this. And when you phone get a squad over here as quickly as possible. Don't be too long.'

A few moments afterwards and Higgins was once more picking his way across that littered floor towards the staircase, his good-tempered flash still doing sterling duty.

He was very, very—more from habit than conviction—until the thought protruded that extreme caution should no longer be necessary. Anyone or anything inimical here would surely have gone with Fanworth and Kenton. He stepped boldly into the room above, the ray of his torch swept round and halted to pin-point a camp bed in the far corner with a wriggling human parcel upon it.

Hastily he crossed over. It was a woman. Her feet were tied at the ankles; there was a sack over her head and arms, laced tightly with cord. Even as the inspector delved in his pocket for a knife the woman gave another stifled scream for help. The cord was tough, the knife not particularly sharp. The bonds snapped at last; Higgins pulled away the cord, gripped the edge of the sack and ripped it open. Miss Langley, red of face and wide eyed, blinked into the light. She had almost bitten through an odd piece of sacking which had served as a gag.

'It's me. Higgins. Take it easy, missie.' Higgins severed the gag with his knife.

Miss Langley pushed herself upright, spitting out pieces of sacking.

'And are you still rather enjoying it all?' asked Higgins dryly.

'The—the two-timing stinker,' gasped Miss Langley. Apparently this was her usual term of opprobrium.

‘Who?’

‘Fanworth.’ She almost spat out the word. ‘Him and his silly clocks. They’re as bad as etchings when you come to think of it.’

The inspector grinned. Apparently Miss Langley was not seriously hurt—physically. Her dignity seemed to have suffered a certain damage, however.

Silently he severed the cord round her ankles. Then:

‘Now tell me all about it, while we’re waiting for your dear Mr Brownall to return to circulation.’

Chapter Eighteen

EXPLANATION

SITTING on the camp bed, rubbing the circulation back into her ankles, Miss Langley told her story. Boiled down to essentials and stripped of unmaidenly vituperation there was really little in it. Apparently Mr Fanworth had seen her at the club earlier in the day and had offered again to take her home when her duties were finished. Unfortunately he would be unable to pick her up at the club, but if she cared to walk along to Collier Close—she knew where *that* was, didn't she?—he would meet her there. And perhaps she might like a short run into the country before he returned her to her hostel.

And what harm could there be in that? He had been a perfect gentleman the previous evening and, despite what Mr Brownall had hinted at afterwards, she still did not believe he was other than he seemed. She said she would. She did. And that was that. She was waiting in the Close for him to arrive. Then she realized he was a little late, which she imagined was most unusual for *him*. And was strolling round the Close to keep herself warm when she was suddenly seized from behind, dragged through a wide doorway and about the next thing she remembered was being in complete darkness, unable to move and scarcely able to breathe.

Incidentally, where was she now?

'That's usually the *first* thing people ask,' said Higgins in a fatherly voice. 'You're still in Collier Close, my dear, as a matter of fact.' He paused. 'You didn't actually see Mr Fanworth then?' he asked.

'I didn't see anybody. But he was the only one who knew where I was going.'

'H'm! Seemingly you forgot to ring up Scotland Yard and tell *me*,' observed Higgins dryly.

'Of course not. Why should I do anything of the sort? I . . . I . . .'

'You thought you could handle him, eh?'

'W-e-l-l.' Her voice changed somewhat. 'You know, inspector, it's funny, really. There's nothing of Mr Fanworth, is there? I mean, I can't imagine how . . . Come to think of it, I'm sure he could never have done all this alone. I'm not exactly a weakling and . . . Oh, dear. Perhaps it wasn't him after all. And here have I been saying the most nasty things about him and . . .'

'Just a moment, missie. The last time you were in Collier Close someone slapped your face. Remember?'

'Yes. That whacking great—whacking great . . .'

'Stinker. That's right. Did you know he was Fanworth's chauffeur?'

'His chauffeur? I didn't know he had got one.'

'H'm! *He* could have handled you easily enough. And he'd seen you in Collier Close before—and certainly knew you were interested in the place.'

'Perhaps it *was* him.'

'Maybe.' Higgins scratched the tip of his nose with his little fingernail, the ray of his torch zigzagging across the ceiling with the movement. Then: 'I'm wondering *why* all this should happen to you. Have you been doing any more snooping round the club?'

'No. I've been too busy, really. I'm beginning to enjoy it there and . . .'

'You mentioned Fanworth's clocks just now. And some crack about etchings. Just as though Fanworth had inveigled you into his room . . .'

'That was nothing. He wanted some coffee sent up. I took it. And he showed me his clocks. That's when he asked me to meet him at Collier Close. He was quite a gentleman all the time. Very fatherly, if you know what I mean. And very polite. In fact I hated all the deception. All the—false pretences . . .'

Inspector Higgins emitted a huge sigh. 'So I suppose you told him who you really were,' he said.

'Well. There was no harm in it, really. I mean it was hateful him always calling me by another name. It didn't seem right somehow, when he was so nice to me and—and wanting to give me a ride in his car and . . .'

'All right, missie. So *that's* how it was. You want your brains tested, you know.'

'Look here, inspector. I'm not going to have you bullying me . . .'

'And I—um—refuse to be cowed. You can work that one out for yourself.'

There was a long silence. Then Miss Langley giggled. Higgins chuckled to himself.

He glanced at his watch and scowled. 'Our Mr Brownall seems a heck of a long time,' he observed.

'Where is he supposed to have gone?'

The inspector sniffed expressively. 'I *think* he's gone for his holidays. He's *supposed* to be finding a telephone box to ring up the Yard. Damme! He could have *walked* there by now.'

Miss Langley giggled. 'Perhaps they've all been blown up—like that ~~one~~ at the back of the club,' she suggested.

The inspector's answering smile fixed momentarily on his face and quickly vanished. He had been reminded of the prompt and ruthless efficiency which had destroyed that kiosk the moment it had become potentially dangerous . . . and this warehouse here, ostensibly derelict, housed a number of crates and bicycles which seemed patently stolen property—and must surely be as 'hot' as hell.

Jerusalem! He ran a fat forefinger round the rim of his collar, which suddenly threatened to strangle him, grabbed the girl's hand and jerked her from the camp bed.

'Here, missie. Let's get out of here,' he said in an urgent whisper.

'W-why? What . . .'

 The girl's voice shook with contagious apprehension.

'Kim on!' They galloped across the room, impelled by near panic; they descended that skeleton staircase almost as quickly as Higgins had done under the weight of the hefty Kenton; the bicycles were but a minor hazard. They reached the outer door and rushed through the tunnel to Collier Close, there to halt breathlessly as, hand in hand, they were spot-lit by the headlamps of a car which had just turned into the cul-de-sac.

The car pulled to a halt. Sergeant Brownall jumped out. Higgins could almost feel the upraised eyebrows.

'Golly, sir. What's the matter? You—you look . . .'

The inspector released the girl's hand and took a deep breath. He coughed apologetically. 'Only a—um—rather lively imagination, son,' he said. 'It—um—occurred to me that . . .'

From behind the façade of the building came a sullen roar, followed by the deafening crash of falling masonry; the gates of the tunnel slammed shut and then burst outwards with the blast; the three were nearly jerked off-balance by the onrush of air, to be promptly steadied by the back-lash as the vacuum created by the blast filled instantaneously.

Higgins cringed and turned.

'G-golly, sir. What was that?' ejaculated the sergeant.

'Mice,' growled Higgins, plagiarizing an ancient cartoon— and then took cautious steps towards the gates of the tunnel. The side door to the building had been blown clean off; dust and smoke poured through the resultant aperture. Even the door opposite, on the other side of the tunnel, had been forced open. The walls, brightly lit by the headlamps of the patrol car, *seemed* all right, though. With some trepidation the inspector took tentative steps towards the side door. If the entire building was going to collapse it would surely have done so by now. And what was the hurry, anyhow? The damage was done.

Dust from the side door thinned and started to settle. There was no more smoke. No fire, then. In which case . . .

'Are you going in, sir?' asked a voice from his side.

Inspector Higgins almost shied. 'Blast it, Brownall. What d'ye mean by creeping up behind me and . . . Oh, forget it. I'm getting as jumpy as a cat. A blasted Siamese cat, if you ask me,' he added—for no reason whatever. 'All right, son. Let's see what the mice have done.'

It was at once apparent that a large hole had been breached in the dividing wall between the two rooms where the connecting door had once been; the shattered door was strewn in pieces across the intervening floor-space. Higgins capably played his torch; so far as he could judge there seemed little chance of further collapse. Carefully he picked his way to the breach in the wall and peered through.

The farther room was a shambles. At first he thought that

the side wall had been completely blown away, for he could see a twinkling light reflected in the river; then, from the rectangular shape of the breach, he realized that it was the wide doors he had seen from the other side which had been blown out. The ceiling had collapsed, covering the debris in the room with laths and plaster; only the three top steps of the skeleton staircase remained. H'm! Perhaps, after all, he had not been in such desperate danger up above as he had imagined—for there was no sign of the camp bed. Presumably it was still safe and sound, protected from the blast by the roof of the tunnel. All the same, there could have been a certain embarrassment at the moment of ultimate rescue, if all that was found in the remains of the floor above was a detective inspector, a comely young lady—and a camp bed! Higgins almost blushed at the thought.

'Radio sets, eh,' said Brownall. 'That looks like a bit of a cabinet by that bicycle wheel.'

'M'yes. Or television. I wouldn't give a dollar for the lot now. H'm! I expect our boys'll be able to check up where they came from. Our friends weren't quite so thorough as before. Must have done this in a mighty hurry. In fact they'd have to—come to think of it. They'd hardly have explosives and fuses all ready for such an emergency. Or *would* they?' Higgins scowled at the wreckage. 'You know, sarge, the alternative is almost unbelievable. It would mean that after you had left and I was—um—up aloft with Miss Langley, someone came in here again and . . .

'That means there was somebody *besides* Kenton and the chap with the gun.'

'Yes. It does, doesn't it? Then where the heck has *he* gone?' Inspector Higgins snorted expressively. 'It just doesn't make sense. Why, damme, *you* might have come back at any minute . . . In fact, they'd have known we'd be back in force in next to no time. As we *should* have been if you hadn't been half asleep on the job. What was *your* trouble? I thought you'd broke a leg or summat.'

'Me, sir?' responded the sergeant, with much indignation.

'Yes. I told you not to be too long. What was the delay? Couldn't you find a kiosk or summat?'

'Well, sir. It was partly that—but in the end I didn't have

to . . . for a patrol car came along. And they hadn't met a car of any sort, let alone an Ocelot, coming towards them. So we knew it must have gone the other way. They radio'd headquarters and another patrol car ahead was warned about the Ocelot. But when we met up with them, *they* hadn't seen it either. So we knew it must have turned down one of the intervening streets. It couldn't have got far. So we cruised about a bit and then . . .'

'And then you suddenly remembered poor old Uncle Higgins groping about in the dark looking for a disembodied scream, I suppose?'

'Well, sir. Headquarters *had* been notified and . . .'

'And here they are, it sounds like,' said Higgins, as heavy feet clamped along the tunnel outside. 'Bring 'em in and tell 'em to be careful. And . . . Hallo, hallo, hallo!' The shambles in the room beyond was suddenly flooded with light, a moving beacon from the river through the wide space where the doors had been. Apparently the River Police were back on the job. The inspector sniffed, turned and marched to the outer door.

There was a hail from the river. It was the police launch which had brought them to the place. And Higgins soon learned that its seeming defection earlier on had been occasioned by a radio from the depot that some barges up-river were being plundered; this having proved a false alarm. . . .

'A very convenient false alarm, if you ask me! Whogave it?'

'A telephone call, I understand, sir.'

'H'm! Got you nicely out of the way, seemingly.' Inspector Higgins scowled at the thought. It *could* be, of course. Showed very efficient organization. Collier Wharf here was spot-lit by the launch's searchlight; they would know that *something* was afoot. And some of the beam must have penetrated the shuttered windows to warn Kenton, who promptly took steps to evacuate the place. And someone—Fanworth presumably—gives the false alarm, getting rid of the launch temporarily and . . . and . . . the usual quick effective counteraction. And prompt disappearance. It was uncanny, somehow.

Dismissing the launch with thanks for its co-operation, Higgins retraced his steps to the tunnel. 'Brownall,' he

called—and the sergeant detached himself from the crowd from headquarters and ran to the doorway. Then he followed the inspector to the patrol car in Collier Close.

'Any news o' that car yet?' asked Higgins as he glared at the radio officer within.

'No, sir. I can't understand it. At this time o' night and in this part o' the world *any* car would stick out like a sore thumb. And all cars in this area are converging. And none of 'em have seen a thing. It doesn't make sense.'

'You're telling *me*. The same blasted car slips out of the Rosemary Club courtyard this morning and promptly vanishes. To turn up here. And . . . Jerusalem, my happy home!'

'What's the matter, sir?'

'Here! Jump in, Brownall.'

'Er—yessir. Bull . . .'

'Dammit! Don't argue.' Higgins almost pushed the sergeant into the patrol car. 'The Rosemary Club,' he roared.

'Oh! I see what you mean, sir.'

The car surged forward.

'It sticks out a mile,' said Higgins as he was flung back to his seat. 'It's the only possible place it could have got to and hidden in the time. Why the heck I didn't think of it before . . . Kenton has even got a key to the gates. *I* dunno!' in sheer disgust.

In less than a minute the car swung into Blacksmith Lane zoomed past the shattered call box and pulled to a sudden halt, with an accompanying screech of protesting tires, before the closed gates at the rear of the Rosemary Residential Club.

Inspector Higgins was out of the car almost before it had stopped; half a second later, with his torch thrust through a central interstice of the lattice work, he was staring unbelievably at the tiny courtyard which was indubitably—almost derisively—empty. A very empty stable indeed!

The gates were locked. As was the front entrance of the place. It showed no lights. There was no night bell.

'Blast it to all hell, Brownall. I've had enough of it for one day. I'm going home to bed.' He sniffed. 'We *should* be able to get in an hour or so before we're supposed to be on duty agen. Be seein' yer!' He strode away.

Chapter Nineteen

SEARCH-WARRANT

THE doorkeeper of the Rosemary Residential Club eyed the two non-members with a measure of veiled hostility, as though he knew he was going to be asked to do something without commensurate compensation—in which he was very right. He recognized the younger man as the officer who had made all the inquiries following upon the secretary's suicide; the other had been the big cheese who had directed operations when the work-room down below had been lousy with coppers.

Inspector Higgins, wearing his Sunday-best suit whilst his other was at the cleaners for repairs to a bullet-snagged sleeve and general refurbishing, eyed the doorkeeper sourly.

'Has Mr Oakfield showed up this morning?' he asked.

'I haven't seen him, sir.'

'What about Mr Unwin? Is he here?'

'I—er—will endeavour to find out, sir,' responded the doorkeeper.

'H'm! That means he is, I take it. So don't run away yet. We don't want Mr Unwin slipping out the back way—like Mr Oakfield did once before when he was wanted.' And Higgins raised one eyebrow, looking very wise.

The doorkeeper blinked. 'I—I merely told Mr Oakfield that there was someone waiting for him outside. I couldn't help it if . . .'

'Oh! Quite. Quite,' blandly. 'And where are we likely to find Mr Unwin?'

'In—in the billiards room, sir . . . I think.'

Higgins nodded his head. 'Thanks.' He turned to Sergeant Brownall. 'All right, son. On your way.' Then, to the doorkeeper: 'No, no. Not you. I want you to take me to Mr Quenlock.'

'I can't, sir. He's not here this morning.'

'H'm! Then who's in charge of the place? I have a document here which . . .'

'There's the new secretary, sir.'

'The—the what?' Higgins stared at the man. 'Since when?' he asked.

'Came this morning, sir.'

'Did he indeed. Well, in that case, although I know the way to his office, it might be as well if you came along and introduced us. I'm an inspector, you know. Higgins by name.'

'Er—yessir. Certainly, sir. This way, sir.' The door-keeper seemed most anxious to oblige; it was patent that he felt more than a little uncomfortable in the inspector's presence. Whether or not this was solely occasioned by the earlier Oakfield episode, Higgins was unable to determine. He didn't really think the door-keeper was involved in any of the funny business going on—but guessed that the man had merely a rather commendable partiality towards members as opposed to the world at large.

.

Mr Newport was young, smartly dressed and looked extremely competent. There was a puzzled frown on his face as he eyed his huge visitor from Scotland Yard and whose official visiting card he tapped thoughtfully on his teeth.

'I—er—I'm afraid Mr Quenlock is not here,' he said. 'And as I—um—only started my duties this morning . . .' He smiled a little uncertainly and spread his hands.

'Quite. But it's only a matter of having someone official to whom I can show this—um—search-warrant. We have to look over Mr Fanworth's rooms.'

'Mr Fanworth? I've just come across his name somewhere. Oh, yes. He's the debenture holder, isn't he?' Mr Newport used the inspector's card to scratch his nose. His smile turned rueful. 'Lordy! I seem to have got off to a flying start, don't I? Pity you couldn't have served this yesterday—before I got here.'

'Bad luck. But I'm afraid there's nothin' you can do about it, Mr Newport. How did you get the job?'

'Oh, I applied for it before—but didn't get it. Just r handwriting, too, I should have thought. I was more or le brought up in this type o' business. But I didn't get it. No then, anyway.'

Inspector Higgins grinned. 'You should have been ar author, seemingly,' he said. 'The main qualification ther was an ability to write books.'

'Write books? I have to *earn* my living.'

'It's as easy as that, is it? Personally, I wouldn't know. But you seem to have got the job in the end.'

'Yes. Mr Quenlock, who interviewed me before, rang me up and said the job was still open if I cared to take it. So I jumped at it. This is a job I *can* do. Apparently the chap who got it before died on 'em.'

'M'yes. And the one before that was murdered.'

'Eh? What's that?' Mr Newport stared up into the inspector's face. 'Lordy! What have I let myself in for?'

'H'm! There are no peculiar perquisites attached to the office, I take it?' And Higgins raised one inquiring eyebrow.

'Not that I know of. I mean a club with a fat membership, if you make yourself generally amenable and pleasant, is apt to cough up handsome when the staff list goes round at Christmas. But beyond that . . .' Mr Newport shrugged his shoulders. 'Why?' he asked. '*Should* there be?'

'I was just wondering. That's all. And did Mr Quenlock take up your references?'

'I don't know. He had only to ring up the club where I was assistant secretary—I'm sure they would have given me a first-class reference . . . though I say it myself.'

'I see.' Higgins nodded equably. 'Now about this Fanworth business. I don't necessarily want to break down the door. So if there is a key?'

'There should be, I suppose. I doubt if he does his own cleaning. Must be one of this bunch, I guess. Mr Quenlock was going to be here to—um—induct me, as it were. But we'll have to get on without him till he gets here. All the same, I . . .' He broke off, shrugged his shoulders philosophically and picked up the keys.

'There's no need for you to come along, you know.'

'Oh, I don't know about that. I think perhaps that I'd

'tter.' Mr Newport smiled disarmingly. 'I don't want to lose the job before I've got it. Do you know which is Mr Fanworth's apartment? 'Cos I don't.'

'Oh, yes.' I'll show you the way.'

Trial and error with various keys, all much of a muchness, and at last the door of the Fanworth apartment was opened and Higgins and the new secretary stepped into the diminutive hall. One thing, reflected Higgins, should they want to check up on Fanworth's fingerprints, the clothes-brush on the rack here should prove very fruitful. Then they passed into the room beyond. And here Mr Newport paused and stared in frank wonderment at the startling array of clocks.

'Lordy,' he observed. 'This feller must have missed a train at some time or other.'

'M'yes. And I'm thinking that this time he's probably missed the boat as well,' responded Higgins dryly—and he crossed to a desk in the corner on which was a blank blotting pad, an ink-stand and a telephone instrument. He tried a pedestal drawer and was relieved to find it was not locked—he hated unnecessary damage—and sat himself at the desk.

A clock began to chime; it was the erstwhile juvenile delinquent, which now seemed to be forging ahead. Before it had finished others began to take up the strain. But the synchrony now was a little ragged; in fact some lagged well behind. Wanted winding, perhaps. In theory this should not matter, but in practice a fully-wound clock invariably runs infinitesimally faster than it would do later on. Not that it mattered a hoot either way—but, short of stopping the whole boiling, it would seem that every fifteen minutes there would be a cacophony of distracting sound which would drive him nuts if this turned out to be a long job.

Inspector Higgins sighed and pulled open the drawer. And promptly shut it again. It was filled with an assortment of clock keys all neatly labelled.

Mr Newport emitted an apologetic cough. 'I—um—think, Inspector, that perhaps after all I'd better—um—get back to my office and try to sort myself out a little. There's nothing I can do here save twiddle my thumbs and—er—I must say this is a glorious start to a new job.'

'Please yourself, you know.'

'Then in that case, if you will excuse me . . . ' And Mr Newport departed.

Higgins got down to the job. He did not know exactly what he hoped to find, nor precisely what he was looking for, but surely there ought to be something somewhere which would hook up Fanworth with the roguery which was undoubtedly going on. Or would there? With that fantastic memory for which he seemed to be so proud, it might well be that there was no need for Fanworth to make *any* notes. And for one of his precise nature was it likely he would leave anything incriminating about?

Oh, get on with it, man. Get on with it.

Inspector Higgins jerked open another drawer. Bills, receipts, neatly stacked and tied with tape; a fat sale catalogue of the contents of a country manor. Higgins riffled the page with his thumb, spotted something marked and searched again for the page. Then pitched the catalogue back into the drawer with disgust. The marked item was 'Grandfather Clock. Very Old'.

The inspector started to go through the bills and receipts. All very innocuous.

There was a knock at the outer door and he was glad of the interruption. It was Sergeant Brownall, looking very pleased with himself.

'I think I've put the fear of Old Harry into Master Unwin,' he said, grinning into the inspector's face. 'Tried to deny everything at first, sir, but I asked him if he'd been kicked in the face by a mule—or had he run into a train or something . . . and he began to see that I might know something about his activities last night. And when I showed him that black kerchief you gave me . . . Well, sir, he sort of caved in like. I told him that, although he was not exactly under arrest, he'd better stay put until we'd made up our minds about him. I left him doodling about on the snooker table. He was having a job even to hit the object ball.' And Brownall chuckled happily.

'H'm! Pity he wasn't your pal Oakfield,' observed the inspector dryly. 'Then you could have thoroughly enjoyed yourself.'

'He blames Oakfield though, sir. Says he was the prime mover.'

'And confirms that they were merely—um—playing at detectives, as it were?' asked Higgins, a somewhat sardonic grin on his face.

'More or less, sir. It's fairly patent that the pair of 'em scented fish and were looking for pickings.'

'M'yes. I'd got as far as that meself, son. All right. Come along in and lend a hand. *If* you can work in a mechanical madhouse, that is.'

With the muted background of the ticking of numerous clocks, augmented by the chiming interludes every fifteen minutes, the two police officers systematically went through the desk. Suddenly the inspector sat back and grunted; Sergeant Brownall promptly looked up.

'Got a bite, sir?' he asked.

'Yes. Listen to this. It's a letter from a firm of Estate Agents and Valuers, dated—um—about a year ago. "Dear Sir, We have inspected the warehouse in Collier Close and, in our opinion, it would be a much better proposition to pull down and rebuild rather than try to make good dilapidations. The roof alone is almost beyond repair and . . .'" Higgins broke off and looked up. 'They go on to recite the numerous defects in the building.' He chuckled. 'They ought to go along now and have another look. It'd probably break their hearts.'

'What's it mean, sir? That Fanworth owned the place?'

'Could be, of course. Or that he had instituted tentative inquiries to find out if there was any remote chance of the place ever being used again.'

'You mean before taking it over unofficially as a dump for loot?'

'That's rather the idea, son. But it *does* prove a connection between Fanworth and Collier Close. We'll have to get in touch with these people and get the gen.' The inspector put the letter to one side.

Sergeant Brownall coughed. 'Er . . . Thinking of that kiosk business, sir,' he said in an apologetic tone of voice, 'and then that other explosion you just—um—mentioned, I was—er—wondering . . .'

He broke off and coughed again.

Higgins grinned. 'You're wondering whether or not we might both be sitting on top of a volcano at this very moment,

eh?' He shook his head and waved a hand at the surrounding clocks. 'They're our protection, son. Fanworth wouldn't dream of spilling his own heart-blood.'

'Er—yessir. Perhaps you're right.'

Two uneasy minutes followed. Then the sudden ringing of the telephone bell, duplicated simultaneously from the room beyond, startled them both out of all proportion to the noise it made. Higgins had actually jerked his chair away before reason returned. Then he blew out his cheeks.

'All right, son,' he said. 'Nobody knows we're here so it must be for Fanworth. There's obviously an extension there,' he jerked his thumb to the farther room. 'His bedroom, I expect. Slip along and listen in. Don't remove the receiver till the bell stops.'

Brownall scurried out of the room. Higgins pulled a pencil from his pocket and slid back the metal tray beneath the cradle of the instrument, ready to make notes.

And there he paused, his hand over the instrument, staring at a note which had already been made, in pencil, on the paper clipped in the tray.

POR 8561. The number of that telephone box which had once stood in Blacksmith Lane! So, despite his vaunted memory, Fanworth . . .

The bell ceased. For a brief moment the inspector thought that it was Brownall, too eager at the other instrument. Then he realized that, through his own dilatoriness, the call had died on him. Whoever had intended to ring Mr Fanworth had grown tired of waiting.

Inspector Higgins sat back and started to swear.

Chapter Twenty

COINCIDENCE

HAD the bell not rung again in a very short time it was quite on the cards that Inspector Higgins would have had a seizure of some sort . . . he was so furious at missing such a chance.

And this time he grabbed the instrument from its cradle before Sergeant Brownall was more than half-way to the door of the room.

'Hullo!' he belted in a voice far removed from the precise tones Mr Fanworth might have been expected to use. Higgins could almost have bitten off his tongue at this grave error of tactics. Blast it! *Everything* was going wrong.

'That you, Higgy?' came a well remembered voice.

Inspector Higgins could scarcely believe his ear. Why, *nobody* knew he was here. So how old Chief Inspector Dryan could possibly . . . And this was an unlisted number and . . .

'Yes, sir,' he said at last.

'I *do* wish,' went on Dryan, in an irritated tone of voice, 'that you would stick to schedule, Higgy. You said you were going round to the Rosemary Club. I ring up the club and ask for you. Some whipper-snapper there gives me another number and tells me to ring that. If you *must* alter your arrangements I wish you would notify *us*—and not leave messages with outsiders so that they reach us second-hand and . . .'

'But I didn't, sir,' interposed Higgins, stemming the flood.

'Dammit, man! That whipper-snapper . . .'

'That was the new secretary, sir.'

'The what?'

'New secretary, sir. Demonstrating his efficiency.'

'I don't get it. Where are you?'

'Where I said I would be, sir. At Fanworth's apartments. This is a private line—not an extension from the club.'

'Oh, I see. Dammit, man. When you didn't answer the first time just now I thought the number he gave me was a fake or a stall and . . . Well, never mind *what* I thought.' The chief inspector seemed to have simmered down a bit. 'Found anything?' he asked

'He's our man all right, sir.'

'I see. Well, *we've* found something, too.'

'I decd, sir?' politely.

'Yes. Fanworth's car.'

'His car? Good. Where was it found?'

'Where anybody but a half-wit would have looked for it in the first place. I dunno, Higgy. I think you must be getting old or something. You phonc us and say the car has just left that club, with a driver with a black eye and a passenger. It vanishes. Fair enough. It was hidden at Collier Close, seemingly. Then it promptly vanishes from there and you've had half the patrol cars half the night searching for it when all the time . . . Dammit! What *is* that blasted row?'

'Clocks, sir,' bellowed Higgins above the din—and further discussion was impossible as the multitude of clocks droned out the hour. Inspector Higgins frowned in an effort to concentrate. Apparently he had overlooked the obvious somewhere. Of course, it was so easy for old Dryan, knowing the answer, to be wise after the event. Or, as a Stock Exchange pal had once observed, it is so very easy to job backwards. All the same . . . And to think that young Brownall was listening in to all this . . .

The noise slowly subsided to a discordant hum.

'Well?' blared Dryan. 'Where did *you* think the car might be hidden . . . if you thought at all?'

'I—um—half imagined it might have slipped back again to the club here, sir. But it hadn't and . . .'

'Club, me foot.' There was a pause. 'Well? Don't you want to know?'

'I was—um—waiting for you tell me, sir,' said Higgins—determined not to show any interest whatever.

Chief Inspector Dryan snorted noisily. 'Fanworth's car never left Collier Close,' he said at last.

'It never *what*, sir?' The inspector sounded absolutely incredulous.

'You 'eard!' Dryan snorted again. 'The River Police have just phoned up. It's low tide on the river. And the rear bumper and number plates of a car are just visible above the water line.' It's Fanworth's Ocelot right enough.'

'Jerusalem! Anyone in it?' asked Higgins in an unguarded moment.

'Use your loaf, man. *My* guess is that it was deliberately driven into the river at the very outset. It was *you* who jumped to the conclusion that the pair would be making off in it. Still, it helped to keep the patrol boys up to scratch, I suppose . . . looking for something which was never there. All right, Higgy. Over to you.' The line went dead. It was some seconds before the dialling tone resumed—some seconds before Higgins heard the click as Brownall replaced his receiver.

Then the sergeant returned from the bedroom, his face sympathetically blank and Higgins slammed his own instrument back to its cradle. Suddenly he chuckled and shook his head slowly from side to side. 'I dunno, sarge. This seems to be one of *those* days,' he said—and rose from his chair. 'Looks as if I've got to go back to Collier Close. You'd better stay here and risk being blown to glory—and carry on by yourself. Now we know that Fanworth's in this up to his neck I want to trace his banking account. Then we can keep an eye on it if he tries to withdraw funds.'

'That shouldn't be very difficult, sir.'

Higgins raised one eyebrow. 'Shouldn't it?' he asked ironically. 'I haven't come across any cheque book yet. He's probably got it with him. And all I've found so far is a new book of paying-in slips which merely gives the bank and not the branch. It's the London & Southern Counties.'

'Head Office might help us, sir.'

'M'yes. Under a Court Order,' responded Higgins in a disillusioned tone of voice. 'I want the information quicker than that. You'd better look for a cancelled cheque. Or, better still, see this new secretary feller. The club pays Fanworth debenture interest. Their cheque should be rubber stamped by Fanworth's bank—which should give us all the dope we want. See if Newton can dig up any cancelled cheque with Fanworth as payee. Then slip along to the

branch of the L. & S. C. and talk nicely to the manager. He's practically certain to be as sticky as all hell but you never know. He may co-operate. He may be afraid not to, if you play your cards right. But get the dope somehow or other. Chief Inspector Dryan can apply pressure higher up if needs be. And have the branch watched. Fanworth is bound to need funds in the very near future. Then we can act. *You* know what to do. Be seein' yer.'

Very shortly afterwards Inspector Higgins was once more passing through that tunnel in Collier Close to Collier Wharf beyond. And there, at the edge of the jetty, was much activity. The police launch of the night before was already moored alongside; a lighter, with a lifting crane in the stern, was being manhandled into position, its gentle wash slowly obliterating the rear bumper and number plates of the submerged car.

An officer of the River Police, standing on the jetty, turned as he heard the inspector's footsteps. It was the officer-in-charge of the depot, apparently still on duty.

He grinned up into the inspector's face. 'Hallo, Higgy,' he said—and gestured towards the car in the river. 'Was *this* your big idea of last night?' he asked.

'Could be,' responded Higgins.

'H'm! I thought I'd stay on and see what it was all about. Particularly when my men reported that explosion. As a matter o' fact I'd have had the car out by now if I'd dared use that crane there,' and he jerked a thumb to the warehouse wall with its crane and rusty dangling chain. 'But I didn't want to bring the whole place down on top of us. I sent for the lighter. Shouldn't be long now.' He leaned forward as a goggled head suddenly surfaced alongside the car. 'Anybody inside?' he bellowed.

The goggled head shook an emphatic negative. Then a hand reached up to grip the enormous hook lowered from the lighter's crane. The head vanished again, there was a swirl of monstrous plastic feet and the frogman dived from sight. Within thirty seconds he emerged again, flipped his feet and shot towards the police launch.

The chain of the crane tightened. There was a sound of suction and it seemed but a moment later and the car, with

water cascading from inside, was dangling in mid-air. It turned slowly a complete circle, as though determined to demonstrate its complete emptiness and then steadied as a guide rope was attached to an axle.

At last, after much skilful manœuvring, it once more stood upright on the jetty.

Inspector Higgins surveyed it carefully. The fact that it was so little damaged was a fine testimonial to its makers—or a tribute to the softness of the river bed. The off door at the driver's seat was unlatched, suggesting that old Dryan was right in his surmise that the car had been deliberately jettisoned. And here was proof. The clock on the dashboard had stopped, the hands registering almost the exact moment when Higgins had last heard the toot of the horn—Kenton's signal of the night before—which had presaged that shot which had plunged the warehouse into darkness. So that was that.

The inspector scowled unseemingly at a sodden peaked cap which had been wedged by the weight of the water into the dashboard pocket.

If Fanworth and Kenton had not escaped by car, how the heck *had* they got away? And the answer seemed patently obvious. By boat. Yes. That must be it. Fanworth had phoned the Thames Police to get their launch out of the way. Then promptly came here by boat—just in time to rescue Kenton . . . And then? Hell! The pair of them, having ditched the car, had waited nearby in a boat merely watching events. And it seemed a cinch that one or both had returned, as soon as they thought the coast was clear, to set in train that explosive. They must have worked fast and as a consequence were not so thorough as before . . .

The inspector's scowl deepened. Neither might have known that it was only Brownall who had gone, with Higgins himself staying behind, but Kenton was certainly aware there was a girl, bound and gagged, on the floor above. They could not have known that the resultant explosion would fail to bring the whole place down—and the girl with it. They could not have cared, either. It was a clear case of attempted murder. So far as Kenton was concerned, anyhow . . . Fanworth might be able to plead ignorance of the fact. But surely, in

law, when an innocent bystander was killed during some criminal activity it was murder willy-nilly? Higgins shook his head in doubt. Legal niceties were not his forte. And in any case Miss Langley had got away in time.' Again he felt a queasiness in his stomach at the thought of his own narrow escape.

He turned to the waiting officer-in-charge of the River Police depot.

'You had a false alarm last night,' he said.

The officer nodded. 'We did. Might have been excusable at that, though—for there *were* people working on the barge.'

'And the telephone call giving the alarm? Was that direct to you? Or was it relayed by us after a 999?'

'It was direct.'

'H'm! Bit unusual that, isn't it?'

'Not necessarily. The river people know our number,' the officer spread his hands. 'Easy enough to look it up in any case.'

Inspector Higgins shook his head. 'Good old 999 would be easier, though. And . . .' He broke off. Fanworth, with his photographic memory, might have had no need to look up the number. 'Tell me, old man,' he said. 'When your launch returned here last night, was there any other boat knocking around? A small boat, I mean.'

'Nobody reported seeing one. But we can soon find out.' And the officer promptly crossed to the moored launch. He quickly returned, shaking his head. 'Nothing doing.'

'I see. And the false alarm was in *that* direction,' and Inspector Higgins pointed up-stream. The officer nodded affirmation. 'And so,' continued the inspector, more to himself than to the officer, 'any boat escaping from here must have gone the other way.' And he stared moodily down-stream.

The officer grinned. 'Sounds a fairly safe assumption, Higgy,' he said brightly.

'And somewhere along there is the Water Rat,' mused Higgins. He took a deep breath and squared his broad shoulders. 'I—um—wonder if I could presume again on your—um—good offices and—um . . .'

'You want another lift? To the Water Rat?'

‘Yes, please. If you would be so kind. I’d like to view it from the river. Also I’d like to study the bank on the way.’

‘It’s all of three miles, you know.’

‘M’yes. And that’s the drawback. Considering how quickly you got your false alarm last night, I should have thought their hole-up would have been much nearer here. Unless, of course, they were already on their way here when Collier Wharf was flood-lit by your launch.’

‘You still think the alarm was malicious, then?’

‘If not, it was a remarkable coincidence—to say the least.’

‘I see. Well, well. The Water Rat, eh? Another of your big ideas, I suppose?’

Inspector Higgins nodded equably—and followed the officer to the police launch.

Chapter Twenty-one

SCRAP

THE Thames River Police launch chugged gently downstream at half speed, its blue pennant flapping, hugging the near bank, whilst Inspector Higgins and the officer-in-charge kept a keen look-out for any abandoned boat or similar suspicious circumstances which might give some sort of clue as to how the two men might have got away from Collier Wharf. Occasional diversions had to be made to avoid barges moored off-shore and larger vessels loading or unloading at the wharves.

Higgins was well aware that it was a forlorn hope in any case. If only he had done this journey during the night, the moment the launch had reappeared on the scene, the case might have been in the bag by now. He smiled wryly. More jobbing backwards!

'Of course,' observed the officer, 'they might have gone straight across the river and . . .'

'Don't rub it in, man,' responded Higgins, a shade irritably. 'They might have *swum* for all I know. I'm getting quite adept at locking empty stables.'

Thereafter was a period of comparative silence until at last the inspector shrugged his shoulders and turned from his inspection of the river bank. 'This is sheer waste of time,' he said. 'They've had hours to cover any traces. Let's get a move on.'

The officer-in-charge nodded to the helmsman and the launch surged forward, cutting a swath on the face of the rippling water and leaving a fanning wake. There was no question now of hugging the shore; once in mid-stream the buildings on either bank seemed quickly to be drifting astern.

'Thar she blows,' said the officer, pointing ahead.

'Who?' asked Higgins—a little dumb from concentrating on other things.

'Your Water Rat. They're not shy, are they?'

And they definitely weren't. Not only was the name painted in large letters on the wall facing the river, but below the name an enormous rat was limned in outline, with 'Free House' underneath. It was such a blatant invitation to customers that somehow Inspector Higgins didn't like it. He would have thought that Tough Tatham would have preferred an exclusive clientele—of cronies. It might be, of course, that he wished to attract the returning sailorman, paid off after a lengthy trip, whose filled pockets might provide easy pickings. M'yes. That was more like it.

'They have got a motor-boat, I see,' observed Higgins.

'Yes. Want to have a look at it?'

'I think so.'

The launch swung in an arc and in a matter of seconds was alongside the motor boat. Higgins grasped the gunwale and peered inside the cockpit. He shook his head dispiritedly; this was merely flogging a dead horse. Even if this *was* the boat used last night, he could hardly expect to find his automatic or Brownall's torch conveniently left behind for him to find. It might not be a bad idea to have the boys over and test for fingerprints. They could check up on Kenton's, at least, and . . .

'Lost anything?' inquired a voice. Inspector Higgins looked up. Standing on the tiny jetty, his hands nonchalantly in his trouser pockets, a smile—half a sneer and half amusement—on his face, was Tough Tatham himself.

'Yes,' said Higgins shortly. 'One or two personal effects. I was wondering if you had them.'

'I?' Tatham raised his eyebrows and shook his head derisively. 'I've no need for small change. What's biting you?'

'Where were you last night?' barked the inspector.

'In bed.'

'Can you prove it?'

'My wife may have noticed it.'

'I didn't know you were married.'

'There's quite a lot you don't know, Higgins. And if we're going to discuss my private affairs'—he pulled his hands from his pockets and waved them airy—'I'd prefer it to be done *in* privacy.'

'Fair enough.' Inspector Higgins stepped ashore; then turned to the officer-in-charge. 'Many thanks,' he said. 'And will you tell them to send my car along from Collier Close.'

'Can do,' said the officer—and waved a hand in adieu.

Higgins turned once more to Tough Tatham; his mention of Collier Close had been deliberate but Tatham had made no sign of having heard. His smile, if anything, was wider and maybe more genuine. He nodded his head equably. 'I take it you want me clearly to understand that half the police force know exactly where you are. Personally, I couldn't care less. *This way.*'

The pair went through a side door of the Water Rat until they were once more in that inner room where they had met before.

Tough Tatham let out a yell. 'Fatty!' There was a sound of lumbering feet then a face at the doorway.

'Yes, boss?'

'Drinks. Inspector Higgins likes bitter beer, I think.' He glanced inquiringly at the inspector but Higgins's mind was far away . . . again hearing Kenton's nervous 'Yes, boss,' of the night before. He nodded his head absentmindedly and the large barman hurried away.

Higgins looked up into Tatham's face.

'Do your staff always call you "boss"?' he asked.

'To my face, yes.' His smile was sardonic. 'What they say behind my back is probably nobody's business. Why? What's the catch?'

Inspector Higgins said nothing but began thoughtfully to fill his pipe. The drinks arrived—a foaming tankard of beer for the inspector and a tiny thin-stemmed glass of colourless liquid for Tatham.

The fat barman had reached the door again when Higgins looked up from his pipe. 'Fatty,' he said quietly. 'Tell Kenton I want him.'

'He's not here, sir. I . . .'

'Scram!' snarled Tatham and turned to glare at the inspector. 'Look here, Higgins. You can try to trap me if you like—but I'm not going to have you . . .'

'You know Kenton then?'

'I know a Kenton. He's a customer here sometimes. What's *he* been up to . . . that is, if it's the same man you're talking about?'

'Attempted murder, for one thing.'

Tough Tatham frowned down into his empty glass; then stood up, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and started to pace the floor. 'Attempted murder, eh? On his own?'

'No. *You* might have been with him.'

'I?' Tatham emitted an ironic titter. 'If we're talking about the same chap he'd be the last I'd have with me in a job o' that sort.'

'Unless, of course, it was coincidental and you couldn't help yourself.'

Tough Tatham seemed not to have heard; he continued to pace the floor, his hard eyes concentrated a few inches in front of his moving feet, as though trying to read something from the worn carpet.

'Alternatively,' continued Higgins, in a conversational tone of voice, 'it could have been Fanworth who was with him.'

Tatham halted in his tracks, stared into the inspector's face for a brief moment and then resumed his pacing. The inspector smiled inwardly. The very fact that Tatham had stopped at all seemed to indicate involuntary aberration induced by the name . . . a slip he had tried quickly to cover.

Higgins nodded sombrely. 'Yes, Fanworth. Lives at the Rosemary Club. Winds clocks as a hobby. Runs gangs as a sideline. Know him?'

Tatham stopped his pacing and resumed his seat; he sipped a non-existent dreg from his glass and ran his tongue round his lips. 'You know, Higgins,' he said at last, 'I am not at all sure we are both speaking the same language.'

'But *I* am, Tatham.' Inspector Higgins rose to his feet and stood over the other. 'You're getting just a little too big for your boots, you know. You've loaded it just a little too long. You've come to think that you're above the law just because you've been lucky for so long . . .'

'Why not say careful, while you're at it?' interposed Tatham sneeringly.

'Yeah. But not careful enough. You've been slipping

lately. You're probably entirely unaware that you've had a tail on your tracks recently.'

Tatham laughed fulsomely. 'Believe me, Higgins. *No* one follows me around without my knowing it—or unless I want 'em to.'

'That's what *you* think. You've been followed—and by amateurs at that. Both to Harlbury *and* to Collier Close.'

Tatham leaned back in his chair, thrust his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat and started to drum his fingertips on his chest. 'Harlbury, eh?' he mused. 'Yes. I seem to remember you mentioning the place the last time you were here. You even professed to know the telephone number I was supposed to be ringing. Sheer clairvoyance, if you ask me! And Collier Close. H'm!'

'All coming back to you now, eh?' queried Higgins in a sarcastic tone of voice. 'If it will help you at all I can tell you it was a Mr Oakfield and a Mr Unwin who were so interested in your movements.'

Tough Tatham raised inquiring, supercilious eyebrows as he stared up into the inspector's face. 'Indeed?' he said.

'Yes. Members of the Rosemary Residential Club.'

Tatham's gaze wavered momentarily; he dropped his eyes. An expression of extreme wariness crossed his countenance for a brief moment, to be immediately expunged as he looked up again, poker-faced. It was almost as though a warning bell had suddenly tinkled in his mind. Inspector Higgins did not move. He couldn't understand it. Tatham, sure of his ground, had sparred quite happily until the club was again mentioned. Now he seemed to have withdrawn within himself—as if, for some reason or another, the club was extra treacherous ground. It didn't jell somehow. He *must* have known the police were interested in that club. Why, he had even tried to phone that kiosk near the back exit of the place. So why this sudden trepidation? Why go all cagey when the name cropped up again? It was as though a belated penny had dropped at last and the man was seeing things from a different angle. Which didn't, somehow, make sense. He hadn't batted an eyelid when the club was mentioned just now in connexion with Fanworth. Whereas now . . .

The long silence was broken at last as Tough Tatham

forcefully cleared his throat. 'You say that this—um—Kenton is wanted for attempted murder?' he inquired.

'Amongst other things—yes.'

'And that there was someone with him—who might have been me . . . or someone named Fanworth . . . or Uncle Tom Cobleigh for that matter . . . In fact you don't know who his companion was.'

'I can guess.'

'Oh, you can do that, all right. In fact you *are*, come to that. And all this presumably happened last night—since you asked where *I* was during the night.' He broke off and stared into space.

'You're doing fine,' commented the inspector, nodding his head in mock commendation.

'I should hate you to guess wrong,' said Tatham, surprisingly.

There was a sudden knock on the door—the same distinctive rapping which Higgins had noted on his previous visit—and Tough Tatham tensed and rose warily to his feet. It was quite patent to Higgins that the signal was indicative of danger of some sort . . . or a warning, maybe . . .

'What is it?' The words seemed forced from Tatham's lips.

The door opened. 'I'm sorry to interrupt, boss, but . . .'

An imperative arm thrust the barman to one side. 'Out of the way, Fatty,' said a voice—and Trilby Hat, bareheaded, pulled up short in the doorway, teetered for a fraction of a second as he sized up the situation with his one sound eye—and was gone in a flash.

The door slammed as Higgins charged across the room—only to be impeded by a belligerent Tatham. It was no time for finesse. Higgins let drive, missed—and Tatham's counter hit him full in the chest and nearly knocked him off balance.

'Blast you! Get out of the way,' snarled Higgins.

'What's the hurry?'

Higgins rushed forward, parried a vicious swing and slammed his large fist at the other's jaw. Tatham ducked and a second later the pair were locked in each other's arms; they jarred against the table which overturned. The pewter

tankard hit the wall with a metallic crunch, the tiny glass was shattered. The inspector found himself almost powerless in the other's bear-like hug—then deliberately flung himself to the floor in an effort to break it. The impact as they hit the carpet seemed to shake the house. They rolled over till brought up short by the wall.

Higgins expanded his huge chest, flexing his mighty muscles as he strained to break free; he could feel the other's hold gradually slipping till it finally broke. He jumped to his feet; but Tough Tatham was just as quick and was still between him and the door.

Again the inspector charged forward; his apparently wild left was just a feint. As Tatham jerked up an arm to parry the expected blow, an almighty right seemed to come from nowhere; a huge balled fist cracked him full on the point of the jaw and almost lifted him from his feet. He toppled to the floor. Tough Tatham, for the first time in his life, perhaps, was out—cold.

Higgins jumped over him, ran to the door and yanked it open. He ducked, just in time to avoid a savage sweep from a broom-handle, then buried his fist almost to the wrist in an ample paunch. Fatty, the barman, incontinently folded up, collapsed and retched.

Inspector Higgins reached the street at last. Trilby Hat was not in sight. Higgins returned to the Water Rat, raced to the jetty. The motor-boat was still there. It was some minutes before he convinced himself that the man was no longer on the premises. Then he used Tough Tatham's telephone.

Chapter Twenty-two

DISILLUSION

WHEN the irate Inspector Higgins returned once more to that inner room, the table had been righted and Tough Tatham was seated at it, placidly setting a game of patience from a double pack of playing cards; seated on another chair was the fat bartender, more or less propped into position by his broom handle and still breathing heavily.

It occurred to Higgins that Tatham used his cards as an incentive to thought. The man looked up and scowled at the inspector.

'You realize, of course, that you've laid yourself wide open to a suit for damages,' he said coldly.

'Have I, indeed? You are under arrest for impeding an officer in the execution of his duties.' Higgins sniffed expressively. 'At least, that will hold you for now.'

'H'm! And how far do you think that will get you? You attacked me first. A man is entitled to defend himself . . . especially in his own house. If you care to come in here and go berserk you must take the consequences. Incidentally, where's your search-warrant? I heard you making free of the place here.'

'I don't need one. I suspected a felony. And in any case, this is a *public* house.'

'And you've been through some of the *private* rooms.' Tatham carefully placed a red four on a black five. 'Find anything?' he asked.

'I certainly didn't find your friend.'

'What friend?'

'Mr Fanworth's chauffeur. You wouldn't know him, of course,' with heavy irony. 'But he seemed to know you pretty well. Came in here as if he owned the place.'

'I can't help that, can I?' said Tatham mildly.

'H'm! And he certainly didn't seem much in awe of you.'

Despite your—um—reputation. And he seems to have got away temporarily.'

'Has he?' with studied indifference.

'That was the main idea, wasn't it?' asserted Higgins.

'You're doing the talking,' said Tatham nonchalantly.

Inspector Higgins snorted and turned to the barman.

'Who was he?' he demanded.

I don't know, sir.'

'He knew you.'

'Everybody seems to. But I don't know 'em all, mister.'

The fat man's shifty eyes swivelled back and forth from the inspector to Tough Tatham.

'Does he often come in here?'

'I don't know, mister.'

'You don't know much, do you?' said Higgins in exasperation.

'Me? I don't know nothing.'

Tough Tatham chuckled softly. Higgins glared. 'Grammatically that's probably true,' he said. 'But a night or two in jug, Fatty, and you'll probably find your memory returning.'

Tatham looked up from his cards. 'And what are you going to charge *him* with? Same as me?' He sniggered fatly. 'You haven't a hope in hell of making it stick. He attacked us both, didn't he, Fatty?'

'Yes, boss.'

'Without any provocation whatever?'

'Without any—um—er—yes, boss.'

Tatham fanned himself with the ace of spades, looked up into the inspector's face and smiled grimly. 'I'm ready when you are,' he said. 'And so is Fatty.'

'That's right, boss.' And the stout barman levered himself to his feet with the aid of his broom handle. 'I dunno how we'll get on at opening time though, boss.'

'We can add loss of trade to the bill of damages. Don't worry about that, Fatty.' Tatham, in mock resignation, swept the playing cards into a heap, tapped the pack into symmetry and rose to his feet. 'Do we walk or ride?' he asked cheerfully.

Inspector Higgins frowned uncertainly at the pair in front of him. It was quite patent that, during his own search of

the premises, Tatham had given the barman his instructions—to sit tight and say nowt. And although Tatham's reputation for toughness might have slipped a notch or two during the past few minutes, this calm acquiescence was entirely out of character. Moreover, he was reputed to be one of the slickest operators of the underworld. So there must be a catch somewhere. Was this meek acceptance stimulated by a desire to get the police off the premises? If so, it seemed to suggest that Trilby Hat might still be knocking around here somewhere. The Water Rat was a very old house indeed. Its liquor licence went back for generations. It was a little too far up-river for a hidden smugglers' hole to be feasible; but it might have a built-in secret hiding-place of sorts. The inspector mentally shook himself at the thought. The operative word was secrecy. Higgins was not prepared to admit to himself that such a place could remain secret for generations; it was much more likely to be public knowledge . . . one of the show-pieces of the establishment. So what? Could it be that Tatham was so sure of his ground that he was actually welcoming arrest—with the main and dominant intention of suing for damages afterwards?

Further speculation on the inspector's part was cut short by the sound of a car pulling up outside; the river police officer hadn't wasted much time, seemingly, in relaying Higgins's instructions. Now he would *have* to act.

'All right, Tatham. You ride,' he said—as though there had been no long intermediary pause in the conversation. 'And Fatty goes with you.'

The door of the room opened.

'I want you to take these two to . . .' Inspector Higgins turned as he was talking, stopped open-mouthed and stared at the doorway. The person standing there was definitely not the beefy constable he had expected, but a smartly dressed young lady of unbelievably elfin innocence, who smiled uncertainly at the group before her and made to withdraw.

'I'm so sorry, Billy,' she said. 'I didn't know you had visitors.'

'Come in, dear,' said Tatham—in such a gentle voice that Higgins could scarcely credit his ears.

The lady advanced into the room and glanced inquiringly

into the inspector's face. Higgins just restrained himself from trying to straighten his tie.

'My wife,' said Tough Tatham, quietly. 'Inspector Higgins, of New Scotland Yard.' He waved a hand in introduction. Higgins bowed a shade uncertainly.

'An inspector? How thrilling.' Mrs Tatham bestowed a dazzling smile.

'Yes, isn't it?' Tatham sounded extremely subdued.

The lady's smile slowly vanished. 'There—there isn't anything wrong, is there?' she asked, diffidently.

'Er—no, dear. But—er—I'm afraid that I . . . I have to go away on business, as it were.' His face crinkled into a disarming smile. 'I—I don't suppose I shall be away very long.'

'But—but aren't we going on the river after all?'

'Not today, dear. Tomorrow maybe. I'm ever so sorry.'

A peremptory cough from Inspector Higgins effectively broke the idyll. The lady turned to stare up into his face with wide innocent eyes. 'I wonder if I might ask you a question, Mrs Tatham?' he said.

'Why, of course. What is it?'

Higgins coughed again—a little more delicately. 'Was your husband with you last night?' he asked.

A sudden flush suffused her face. 'Of course he was,' she said vehemently.

'All the night?' in quiet insistence.

'Of course he was,' she said again. 'We—we're on our honeymoon.' Her lips quivered. 'And now—now this horrid business or whatever it is crops up and . . .'

'Our business can wait, madam,' said Higgins, staring sombrely into her eyes.

'You mean . . .' She turned quickly and ran to Tatham. 'Then we can go after all,' she said . . . and flung herself into his arms with child-like abandon.

Tough Tatham looked over her shoulder, an unfathomable expression on his face as he stared into the inspector's eyes. 'Thank you, Higgins,' he said. 'I won't forget it. I shall be here if you want me.'

Inspector Higgins strode from the room, more than half convinced he was making the world's biggest fool of himself,

though still alive to possibilities. Fortunately his car had just arrived. Before embarking, however, he peered into the other car which was already parked outside to make certain that Trilby Hat was not hiding within. Then he climbed into his car.

'There's a message for you, sir,' said the officer who was driving it.

'That must wait for a minute. Let's get away from here.' Thirty yards down the cobbled roadway and Inspector Higgins waved an arm out of a window and stopped an approaching patrol car. He leaned out and gave some very precise instructions. 'Got that?' he asked at last.

'Yessir. We'll make a house-to-house inquiry for the man if you like, sir.'

Higgins shook his head impatiently. 'Waste o' time,' he said. 'Particularly in this part o' the world. You wouldn't get anything, to start with—and if you did it would probably be deliberately misleading. No. Handle it my way.'

'Very good, sir.'

The inspector nodded adieu and relapsed back into his seat. 'Now what's this message?' he said as the driver let in his clutch.

'It's from Sergeant Brownall, sir. I hope I've got it right.'

'So do I,' bluntly.

'I—I mean, sir, it's a little complicated. I got it second hand from headquarters and I don't understand what it's all about.'

'Well, let's have it, man.'

'Well, sir. It sounds double-Dutch to me. Sergeant Brownall says that the debenture interest is paid under a banking order, so there are no cancelled cheques. Also that the new secretary has no authority yet to instruct his own bank to give the necessary information. So Sergeant Brownall has gone along to the nearest branch in the hope that it's the right one.' The driver gave a quick side glance at the inspector. 'That's all, sir. I—er—I hope it means something to you,' he added, with no confidence whatever.'

'H'm! It means that everything conspire. That's all.'

Inspector Higgins scowled at the stationary windscreen wiper. Normally, tracing a man's bank was comparatively

simple—but Fanworth's seemed singularly elusive. The inspector's bright idea of tracing it through the payment of the debenture interest was naturally vitiated when the payment was made periodically under a banker's order without the passing of a cheque. And, considering Newton had only just taken up his appointment as secretary of the Rosemary Club, it was patent that he would have no authority yet to ask his bank for the necessary information. And it was also patent that Quenlock, the chairman—who *did* have the authority—had not yet arrived at the club . . . otherwise Brownall would assuredly have asked *him*.

It really *was* maddening. Doubtless Brownall had asked headquarters to exert a little pressure on the head office—and his idea to go along to the nearest branch of the London & Southern Counties Bank was sound enough, so far as it went. But the L. & S. C. had dozens of branches in London alone and . . .

'Hell!' muttered Higgins, to the consternation of his driver. Then: 'All right, son. Straight back to the Yard. There's nothing much I can do here.'

Twenty minutes later Inspector Higgins was seated at his desk in his cubby-hole at Scotland Yard, more or less convinced that he had been played for a sucker. He had had time for reflection—and he was exceedingly unhappy as a result. So Tough Tatham and that charming child were on their honeymoon, were they? A rum way of spending it, if you ask *me*! Let's think. Within an hour or so of that wage snatch in the West End, Tough Tatham is at Harlbury trying to get telephonic connexion with that call box—on his *own*! When, later at night, Higgins had himself first called at the Water Rat, there was Tough Tatham—again on his own. Though, to be fair, that wide-eyed innocent *might* have been on the premises. And, according to that fat barman, Tatham had been at the Water Rat at the time of the wage snatch. 'We *all* saw you,' he had asserted. Apparently this alleged honeymoon was spent at the Water Rat—with a crowd of cronies.

'I'll give him *Billy*,' growled Higgins—apropos of nothing in particular.

His intercom buzzed. He picked the instrument from its

cradle, listened for a few moments, replaced it—and stared unseeingly at his own name in reverse on the smoke-glass upper panel of the door.

Well, there it was! Duly solemnized before the West End Registrar of Marriages. Four days ago. William Tatham, bachelor and Mary Featherly, spinster. The information had been so speedily procured because it was literally the last entry on the register. So the pair *were* on their honeymoon.

Tough Tatham. Jerusalem! There must be two of him or something, reflected Higgins gloomily and with heavy irony.

Chapter Twenty-three

REPORTS

THERE were one or two reports on the inspector's desk awaiting his attention. To begin with, the 'Cockell' file—the empty cardboard folder—which he had brought back from the Rosemary Residential Club, had been gone over for fingerprints. Only two sets had been found; one, the inspector's own and the other presumably Mr Quenlock's. And that was all. None of Langley's as might have been expected had he removed the contents . . . and none of anybody else. Higgins shrugged his shoulders. Even if there *had* been other prints it was difficult to see what useful purpose they might have served—save to give some indication as to who might have removed the contents. And even *that* information would not necessarily point to Cockell's murderer. The inspector pushed the report to one side.

And what was this? H'm! Details of recent thefts of explosives. Thirty sticks of gelignite and half a dozen coils of fuse stolen from a West country prison's granite quarry. Doubtless knocked off by ex-prisoners who would know the routine there. *That* didn't help much. The only ex-prisoner so far brought to light in this case was Shorty Webb—if one excluded the recent bridegroom—and stealing gelignite was hardly up Webb's street . . . he would probably be much too scared to go near it.

And another theft of plastic explosive from a Midlands works. Plastic explosive, eh? The stuff that can be 'thumbed' into crevices—like safe key-holes—before being detonated. Probably more useful to a crook than sticks. And again no clue as to who had taken it.

One thing, it was patent that someone in the gang was an expert with explosives. Kenton? Most unlikely. Trilby Hat? Who knows. Tatham? Higgins leaned back in his chair. He had never got to the bottom of Tatham and he

probably never would. The man's one imprisonment was for something comparatively mild—and that was years ago. Since when, to use his own expression, he had been careful. But Tatham had run the Water Rat for years—it was hard to see where he could have picked up any knowledge of explosives, where practice rather than theory is of the very essence.

Higgins placed the report on top of the other.

And the last report. The Estate Agents and Valuers had apparently inspected the warehouse at Collier Close a year ago at the instigation of a Mr Fanworth, who owned the place. It was still, theoretically, on their books, though the chances of selling or letting were absolutely nil. They had informed Mr Fanworth as much—and he was not prepared to spend the necessary money for renovation or rebuilding.

On their books, eh? The inspector smiled grimly. He would have laid any amount of money that they no longer held the keys of the place. Fanworth would have seen to that! Ah, well. It was an I dotted, anyway.

But, thinking of that warehouse in Collier Close, there was one thing which struck Higgins as being slightly incongruous—the fact that it was the inner room which had been used for housing the ostensible loot and not the room nearer the door in the tunnel. Why cart the stuff across that room at all? Why not use the first room one came to? And then Higgins remembered those wide doors of that inner room which had been blown out as a result of the explosion. When he had first seen them from the jetty he had assumed they were nailed secure by criss-cross boarding. If that boarding were merely camouflage then the reason the inner room was used was obvious. It *was* the first room one came to—from the river. *That* was the answer. The river again.

The inspector was placing the Estate Agent report on top of the other two when he paused. Estate Agents don't work for nothing. Nor were they likely to be paid by cash—no, come to think of it, by a standing order to the bank! For reporting on the premises at Collier Close they would have been paid by cheque. Fanworth's cheque. Was it likely they would have kept a note of the branch? Perhaps not—but it was worth a try, maybe.

Higgins reached for his telephone. He was half-way

through the process of dialling the number when there was a knock on the panel of his door and Brownall entered. Such was the expression on the sergeant's face that Higgins promptly replaced the instrument on its rest.

'What now, son?' he asked.

'Too late, sir,' said Brownall dramatically. 'Fanworth withdrew practically the whole of his current account the moment the bank opened this morning.'

'He what?' Higgins thrust out an interrogatory chin. 'How much?'

'Fifteen hundred pounds, sir. Actually he was a few pounds more in credit but . . .'

'He collected it himself?'

'No, sir. Not personally. According to the manager it . . .'

'But dammit! Do you mean to say they paid out fifteen hundred blasted quid to a complete stranger without—without . . .'

 The inspector seemed to run out of words.

'No, sir. Not at all, sir,' said Brownall hastily. 'I was coming to that. It was his chauffeur who cashed the cheque.'

'Trilby Hat,' muttered Higgins. 'The nerve of the feller.'

'Apparently he often went to the bank for cash, sir. There was nothing unusual about it—barring the size of the cheque. And I rather gather that Mr Fanworth is a valued customer and it was his signature right enough and there were sufficient funds to his credit. . . '

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Higgins testily, drumming the top of his desk with his fingernails.

'The cashier even noticed his black eye, sir,' continued Brownall, gilding the lily.

'Did he indeed,' snarled the inspector. 'That's more than half the police force seems to have done.'

'That's probably because he might have been wearing goggles, sir. The cashier said he had a pair dangling round his neck—as if he had come by motor-cycle. And he was adjusting them as he left the bank. But which way he went afterwards I'm afraid I don't know, sir.'

'H'm! I do. To the Water Rat. To see Tough Tatham. There's a crowd of our chaps there now, looking for him. But if he's got a motor-bike . . . Damn!' And the inspector's

drumming fingertips sounded like the charge of a distant squadron of cavalry.

If Trilby Hat had a motor-cycle then he could be anywhere by now. Fanworth must trust the feller an awful lot to let him loose with fifteen hundred smackers, though. Yet Higgins was quite sure he had heard no sound of a motor-cycle prior to the man's arrival at the Water Rat . . . nor subsequently to his hasty departure. But *that* might have been because of the immediate fracas with Tough Tatham. As he had observed on a previous occasion, when he was mad clean through he must go deaf or something. And if he had not heard the motor-cycle when it arrived at the Water Rat it *could* mean that Trilby Hat was already on the premises . . . or had parked it some distance away . . . or . . .

Dammit! What the heck did it matter *now*? Higgins remembered his crack to Newport, the secretary of the Rosemary Club, anent Fanworth having missed the boat . . . and sneered at himself. The boot seemed very much on the other foot.

Further meditation was interrupted by another knock on the door panel. This time it was a plain-clothes constable.

'We've picked up Shorty Webb for you, sir,' he said. 'Shall I bring him up?'

'Please.' The constable withdrew. Whilst Webb was being fetched from below, Higgins told Brownall of the happenings at the Water Rat earlier on—and although the sergeant made no comment on Tatham's seeming immunity from arrest he was loyal enough to imagine that the inspector must have some good reason for his restraint.

And Shorty Webb, when he eventually arrived, was inclined to be truculent. He jerked his arm away from the constable's guiding hand and glared at Brownall and Higgins.

'This is sheer prosecution,' he said at last.

The inspector grinned. 'We haven't got so far as that yet,' he said amiably. 'The word you want is persecution. But that doesn't mean a thing, either. Sit yourself down—with a benevolent wave of his hand to a chair—'and make yourself comfortable. We want some help.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'We might even pay for it.'

'Now you're talkin', mister. How much?' Shorty Webb sidled to a chair and sat on the very edge, without taking his eyes from the inspector.

'Say half a dollar.'

'You can't expect much for half a dollar.'

'We don't. We might even stretch it to five bob—if it was worth it. Or—um—if you were at all unco-operative we could go further—and give you free board and lodging for a period.' Higgins pulled open a drawer in his desk and extracted therefrom a couple of photographs, one of which he handed over. Webb took it very diffidently as though afraid of contamination. 'Know him?' asked Higgins.

'No, I don't.' The denial was very forthright.

'Now, take your time. Have a good look. In your line of country you *ought* to know him.'

'I dunno what you're talkin' about, mister. Who is he?'

'I want *you* to tell me that.'

'Why? Don't you know?'

'Oh, yes. I know all right. But I want to know if *you* know. Have you ever seen him or had any dealings with him at any time? Is he the gentleman you used to run errands for?' And Inspector Higgins leaned forward impressively.

'I don't know him from Adam, mister. Honest I don't.' Shorty Webb looked up from the photograph to stare blankly up into the inspector's face. Higgins rather thought he was telling the truth for once. He sighed, took Tough Tatham's official photograph from Webb's unresisting fingers and handed over the other. 'Now have a decko at this.'

Shorty Webb stared long and earnestly at the photograph which had been taken at the last annual dinner of the Rosemary Residential Club; and it seemed fairly obvious from his manner that he recognized someone depicted there.

'Know any of 'em?' asked Higgins insinuatingly.

'Well—er—I've seed him and him.' And Webb's chubby forefinger pointed out Messrs Oakfield and Unwin. 'They often go *into* that club in Rosemary Street. Oh, yes. An' that feller dressed up like a hambone is the snooty doorkeeper there. *He* can look after hisself, he can! If you so much as *try* to open the door of a cab before he get there he'll . . .'

'Business pals of yours?' asked Higgins, a nuance of disappointment in the tone of his voice.

'Never spoken to any of 'em . . . save that stuck-up flunkey feller. And *that* was only to call him a . . .'

'Never mind that now.' Higgins pointed to a figure in the background, studiously inspecting a wrist-watch. 'What about him?' he asked.

'Never seed him before in my life.' The answer was prompt—very prompt.

Too prompt? Inspector Higgins tapped the photograph with an impressive fingernail. 'You're perfectly sure of that, I trust?' he said.

'W-why! Of course I am, mister.'

'I—er—see.' Slowly the inspector took the photograph from the man's fingers, peering thoughtfully at his profile. There was a long pause. Shorty Webb was staring fixedly at the place where the print had been, as though somehow frozen into immobility. At last he turned his head, glanced up at the inspector and quickly looked away again.

Higgins nodded his head. 'Like that, ch?' he said. He dived into a trouser pocket, pulled out half a crown, flipped it into the air, caught it and slammed it on to the top of his desk. 'What is it?' he asked. 'Heads or tails?'

'Tails,' said Webb in a small voice.

'Your luck's clean out,' said Higgins. 'It's heads.' And he thrust the coin back in his pocket. Then relented. 'Here you are, Webb. Take it and scram—before I change my mind.'

Shorty Webb grabbed the proffered half a crown and edged quickly towards the door—patently glad to be on his way out.

Sergeant Brownall shut the door behind him. 'He seemed to recognize Mr Fanworth, sir,' he observed, as he walked back to the desk.

'M'yes. But that tells us a helluva lot, don't it?'

'But I thought he told you that he didn't know *who* his employer was, sir. You said that he let slip it was Kenton who actually paid him—but that was all. He didn't know who was behind *him*. At least, that's what I understood that he told you.'

'Quite right, son. And I believed him.'

'Then why should Fanworth's photograph send him all of a doo-dah?'

Inspector Higgins sniggered without much mirth. 'At a guess he's been emulating your old pal Oakfield—and doing a bit of snooping on his own account.'

'I suppose that's it, sir.' Sergeant Brownall nodded a qualified agreement. He *did* wish old Higgy would cut out this 'old pal' motif—he'd flogged it nearly to death. Merely because at the outset of the case he had told old Higgy that Oakfield had tried to ride the high horse all over him, and that he didn't like it, was no excuse to keep plugging away at each and every opportunity when the man's name cropped up again. . . .

'Don't worry, son,' said Higgins, breaking in on the sergeant's thoughts. 'Although Shorty Webb doesn't know it, he's still got a cop on his tail.' He sniffed. 'I hope!' he added darkly. He slipped the two photographs back in his drawer and slammed it shut. Then he rose to his feet. 'I'm going to have a spot o' lunch,' he said. 'And after that I'm going to try to squeeze in a little shut-eye in the Rest Room. Goodness knows, after the hours I put in yesterday, I've earned it.' He stretched ecstatically, screwed up one eyelid and leered at the sergeant with the other eye. 'It is to be hoped that I shall not be disturbed.' He paused. '*Should* the occasion arise, however, it is even more to be hoped that it will prove of—er—sufficient consequence.' He raised both eyebrows meaningly. 'Got that, sarge?' he asked.

'Er—yessir.'

'Good.' Inspector Higgins, having rather belaboured his point, strode majestically from the room.

Chapter Twenty-four

PROTEST

A RHYTHMIC snore reverberated round the Rest Room; the large figure on the couch was almost completely muffled by three heavy overcoats—borrowed without the consent of their respective owners—which rose and fell in even tempo; two large feet protruded over the edge of the couch.

Sergeant Brownall opened the door, peeped in, then tiptoed towards the couch where he paused and heaved a heavy sigh. He scratched his head in indecision, then stretched out a tentative hand and gently touched the inspector on the shoulder.

The snoring ceased forthwith; Inspector Higgins opened one jaundiced eye.

‘Well?’ he asked, uncompromisingly.

Brownall coughed with much diffidence. ‘It’s the River Police on the telephone, sir. The—the officer-in-charge was—er—most insistent.’

Higgins sat up, shedding the coats. ‘Then why the deuce didn’t you call me?’ he asked, a shade inascibly. ‘Have him put through here.’ He crossed to the wall-telephone. His bell rang before he had even reached it—proof that Brownall had anticipated requirements. Higgins lifted the instrument from its cradle.

‘Sorry to interrupt you, Higgy. Young Brownall told me you were very busy but you *did* ask me to ring you up personally as soon as there was anything to report.’

‘That’s all right,’ said the inspector gruffly. ‘I was—um—in conference. What’s the gen.’

‘I think it was only a sightseeing tour after all. Tough Tatham and his lady left the Water Rat by motor-boat and just more or less cruised around the river. We kept an eye on ’em with binoculars. They went up-stream from the Water Rat—the lady at the tiller . . . for the first time, at a guess.

L plates ought to be compulsory on the river same as on the road. Dammit, she nearly ran us down on one occasion.'

'They saw you, then?' asked Higgins, scowling at the wall in front of him.

'Yes. Couldn't help that. We weren't on the move or anything. They wouldn't know we were actually watching 'em. They waved to us as they passed. Incidentally, she's a charming wench, isn't she?'

'You're telling *me*,' responded Higgins with heavy meaning 'Did they get as far as Collier Wharf?'

'Oh, yes. They weren't alone in that. The explosion there has made it one of the current sights. Most of the watermen are cashing in on it. We might almost be traffic cops thereabouts.'

'H'm! Did Tatham and the girl stop anywhere?'

'Only off Collier Wharf where they drifted along with the other sightseers gawping at that car we salvaged. Of course, it is just possible they might have stopped when on the blind side of sundry boats in the river—though, for the time they were out of sight, I doubt it. It seemed more in the nature of a joy-ride—with the woman at the wheel seeing exactly what she could make the boat do . . . like a kid with a new toy. They actually circled some of the moored barges and once nearly got run down by a sea-going tramp.' The officer chuckled. 'I'll bet the master's language matched the blare of his warning siren. Tatham took over for a few moments then—but handed it back to the lady as soon as they were in the clear. Eventually they returned to the Water Rat after what must have been a most exciting trip for all concerned. Except for us, of course.'

'I see. Very many thanks. I *had* hopes but . . . There it is.'

'Another big idea down the drain, eh?'

'That's right. They don't all come off, you know.'

Inspector Higgins replaced the instrument on its rest and turned to Sergeant Brownall who was dutifully hanging three great-coats on the rack near the door. 'Another bum steer,' he said. 'Apparently Tatham and his lady did *not* go visiting after all. Or they must have guessed they were under surveillance, or something. Or they're just what they

pretend to be—a pair o' love birds having a most unconventional honeymoon.' He sighed. 'Somehow we seem to be at a standstill. Going backwards, if anything. Any news of Trilby Hat, or Fanworth, or Kenton?'

'No, sir. They must have another bolt-hole somewhere. The Rosemary Club's finished so far as they're concerned and so is Collier Close. And . . .'

'Jerusalem! I wonder if they've had the gall to go back to that chapel place? I . . .'

'I attended to that, sir—while you were—um—in conference, after lunch. If they *do* go back there they'll find a welcoming committee in residence.'

'Well done, son. The only snag is that fifteen hundred blasted quid. That'll keep 'em going for quite a piece . . . assuming Trilby Hat hasn't stuck to the lot.' The inspector shook his head regretfully. 'Pity we weren't in time to stop it.'

'I couldn't help it, sir,' replied the sergeant, quickly on the defensive. 'It was just guesswork which branch Fanworth might be using. I was lucky to find it at all. And even then I doubt if the manager would have opened up if it hadn't been for the fact that Fanworth had practically closed his account and the manager had an awful thought that there might be something wrong somewhere. I doubt . . .'

Higgins held up a restraining hand. 'That's all right, son. I'm not blaming you—it's just the cursedness of things. Well. There it is.' He shrugged his shoulders.

The telephone bell trilled again and Brownall crossed to the instrument.

'Yes. He's still here.' The sergeant turned and handed the telephone to the inspector. 'For you, sir.'

It was a relayed message from a patrol car. A motor-cycle had been found, ostensibly abandoned, on a cleared bombed site on the river bank about half-way between Collier Close and the Water Rat. Should they bring it in or keep observation on it in case someone came to collect it? Or what?

'Bring it in and have it gone over for fingerprints. And the number checked up. We can apologize afterwards if it's on the up an' up. People shouldn't leave motor-bikes lying about.'

Higgins rang off. 'All right, son. Conference over. Back to work.'

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The licence number of the motor-cycle was quickly checked but proved disappointing—the presumptive owner having sold it in part exchange to a dealer who had promptly sold it again for cash. The new owner had merely driven it away and that was that.

The dealer was unaware of his name and extremely vague as to his appearance. After all, it was a cash transaction, little real money was involved and he had dozens of similar transactions during the course of business. Moreover, the sale having taken place some time ago, Trilby Hat's current black eye couldn't possibly help identification, even assuming it *was* he who had bought the motor-cycle. The fact that the purchaser was a big man was the only pointer—and that was a very wavering finger!

But a thumb-print on the hand-grip of the right handle-bar had its measure of interest, partly because it was already on file in the Criminal Records Office but mainly because Soapy Sands, who had left it behind, was a known *habitué* of the Water Rat—albeit of no great stature.

Inspector Higgins rubbed his hands together. 'Let's see, Brownall, what's his line?' he asked. 'Petty theft, isn't it?'

'That's right, sir. He's light-fingered—and not very skilful either. Shouldn't have thought Tough Tatham would have much use for him.'

'H'm! You'd better go along and drag Soapy in. Tell him we've found his motor-bike and he'd better come along and claim it. And when we get him here . . .' Higgins left it at that and laved his hands again in silent relish.

'Right, sir. I'll see if I can pick him up.'

It could not have been more than five minutes after Sergeant Brownall had left on his errand that the inspector's intercom buzzed and he lifted the instrument from its hook. He could hardly believe his ears.

'Tatham?' he said incredulously. 'Tough Tatham? Are you sure? H'm! All right. Send him up.'

Inspector Higgins leaned back in his chair. Now this really *was* surprising. His mind went back to his first interview with Tatham at the Water Rat and the way he had been received. Pity he hadn't a pack of cards so that he could accentuate the reversal of roles. He smiled grimly at the thought.

The inspector was ostensibly exceedingly busy studying a report when Tough Tatham was ushered into his cubby-hole.

'You've got a nerve coming here, haven't you?' said Higgins, without looking up.

'Yes, I have, haven't I?' responded Tatham—and seated himself unasked on the opposite chair. 'That's how it went before, wasn't it? And then *you* say: "Well? What do you want, now that *you are* here?"—or something like that, if my memory serves.'

Inspector Higgins looked up at last. 'Well? What *do* you want?' he asked coldly.

'I want to know what is going on. I was on the river this morning with my wife and the River Police seemed remarkably ubiquitous—although that may be merely my imagination. I came here in the car I gave my wife for a wedding present. I think I told you before that *no* one follows me around without my knowing it—or unless I want 'em to. I did *not* imagine the car which followed me all the way here. I want to know why I am being chivvied around.'

'You think we are responsible, then?'

Tatham emitted a short bark of a laugh. 'Nobody else would dare,' he said.

Higgins raised one eyebrow. 'You hate yourself, don't you?' he said in a mild voice.

'I can look after myself—if that's what you mean. Well? What's biting you people? And where do I come in?'

'We're investigating a murder and a presumed suicide which may well be murder. And both victims were once secretaries of the Rosemary Residential Club,' said Higgins with icy deliberation, carefully watching the other's face. But this time, mention of the club brought no reaction. Tatham, seemingly, had his emotions—if any—well under control. 'And we strongly suspect that you are implicated.'

'I? I am a mere publican—and just married, at that. To put it mildly, it is a little embarrassing to be followed around when on one's honeymoon.'

'H'm! Without offence, your honeymoon would seem a little—um—unorthodox. You being here, for one thing, and leaving your wife behind.'

'She'll be quite safe at the Water Rat, thank you. I'm not worried. Fatty's there. He'll look after her.'

'Fatty, eh? I shouldn't have thought that Fatty would prove a very efficient bodyguard.'

'Wouldn't you? He's looked after her for most of her life. It was through him I met her, if that's of any interest. He's her uncle.'

'Jerusalem! And is his name Featherly, too?' And Inspector Higgins smiled.

'So you have been checking up on us, have you? And what's so funny about it?'

'I'm sorry. It was merely that I thought the name, applied to one of his bulk, was—um—monstrously inapposite.' And the inspector's smile widened.

'Mebbe. But don't worry about Fatty. He's a good scout. Paid for her schooling and all that.' Tough Tatham's face crinkled into a smile which completely altered his usual forbidding expression. 'Or I did, if it came to that,' he added, 'cos he couldn't have done it on the wages I pay him.' And Tatham actually laughed. 'It's funny, really. I can't pay him more because then he'd know that I know he's been fiddling my till for years. So I just keep quiet. And provided he fiddles within reason he's welcome. I knew all the time it was for Mary, his niece.'

There was a long silence. Then: 'You're a queer cuss, Tatham,' said Inspector Higgins.

'Am I? If I told you I'd been running straight for years, you wouldn't believe me, would you?'

'I'm afraid not.'

A saturnine smile crossed Tatham's face. 'Then I won't tell you so,' he said whimsically.

'You have a reputation. And you have some very queer customers at the Water Rat.'

'Do I? I wouldn't know. All I can say is, that anyone

who uses my house knows that I can keep my trap shut.' He smiled. 'Whatever I may hear,' he added.

'You condone it, then?'

'I'm not paid to do anything about it. Live and let live is my policy.'

'H'm! A queer philosophy.' Inspector Higgins gravely nodded his head. 'Live and let live, eh? And yet two men have died.'

'Nothing to do with me, I assure you.'

'H'm! Why were you at Harlbury the day of that wage snatch?' asked Higgins, with a quick change of subject and with the half hope that he might catch the other on the wrong foot.

'To buy some cigarettes,' responded Tatham, smiling broadly.

Ah, well. It was only a half hope anyway. 'And talking of your customers at the Water Rat, what can you tell me of Soapy Sands?'

'Just that he's a customer. But you seem to know that.'

'Anything else about him?'

Tough Tatham sighed. 'I did mention that I can keep my mouth shut, didn't I? And in any case I don't know anything about him save that he's a good hand at darts—and that, I suppose, is not relevant.' He rose from his seat. 'Well, I've lodged my protest. Am I still to be followed around?'

'It wouldn't surprise me.'

'Blast you, Higgins. Why can't you leave me alone?'

'Perhaps I will . . . when this case is finished—and assuming it's nothing to do with you.'

Tough Tatham walked out without another word. The door closed quietly. A puzzled Inspector Higgins stared for a long time at the bowl of his empty pipe. Then he shook his head from side to side.

'Cussed if I know,' he muttered at last, pulling his tobacco pouch from his pocket.

Chapter Twenty-five

FINGERPRINTS

THERE was a knock on the panel of the door and a somewhat excited officer from the fingerprint department burst into the inspector's cubby-hole.

'That motor-cycle, sir,' he said—almost breathlessly. 'You told me to give it a very thorough inspection. And I have, sir. I've found another print. On an inner tube this time. A perfect print. Made on the patch covering a puncture and absolutely clear-cut in the rubber solution. And the print matches with those found in the work-room of the Rosemary Club and on those playing cards from the chapel place and on that trilby hat, sir.'

'Jerusalem! So it *was* his motor-cycle, then.' Inspector Higgins sat up. 'Well done. Well done, indeed. I'll remember this.' The officer almost blushed with pleasure. 'Inner tube, eh? That's what I call being thorough. And it suggests the man has had the thing for quite a while. And Soapy Sands of the Water Rat also uses it. Probably communal to the gang.' Inspector Higgins scratched the tip of his nose with a fingernail. 'Let's think, now. M'yes. Radio the cars operating in the Water Rat area to extend their inquiries to where the motor-cycle was found. The chap with the black eye may be somewhere in between. Or beyond, come to that. Though the fact that the cycle was left where it was suggests . . . H'm! On second thoughts get 'em to *concentrate* round about that cleared bombed site. He shouldn't be too far away. And . . . Oh, yes. Notify the River Police as well. There's at least three men hiding round there somewhere—the feller with the black eye, the man Kenton and Fanworth—and it may well be that they are all together. And Fanworth's armed. In fact he's . . .' Higgins broke off. He had been about to say that Fanworth was doubly armed but there was no real need to advertise the fact

that Fanworth now held a police automatic—for which Higgins himself had indented. 'All right, son. Get cracking.'

The officer, glowing under the fulsome commendation, departed hurriedly—hypothetical sergeant's chevrons already on the sleeve of his jacket.

Inspector Higgins sucked at the stem of his pipe and was half minded to go along to the seat of operations himself rather than to stay at the Yard until Brownall returned. After all, any interrogation of Soapy Sands had more or less paled into insignificance now that the motor-cycle had been proved to have belonged to Trilby Hat. Sands was probably the merest cog in the organization . . . like Kenton and Shorty Webb. The chances of his knowing anything material were practically nil even if he could be made to talk. And he, too, might have gone to ground—in which case it might be some considerable time before young Brownall . . .

The inspector's thoughts were interrupted by the sergeant's arrival.

'Hallo, son. Got him?'

'Down below, sir. Picked him up at the Water Rat. He was as surprised as any of 'em. It's a cinch that they all knew there was a lot of police activity in the neighbourhood and now they've got the impression it was only Sands we were after.'

'Which will be enhanced when they realize that the activity has moved away somewhat.' Higgins nodded his head in self-confirmation. 'All to the good, perhaps. And Soapy denies he can even ride a motor-cycle, I suppose?'

'Of course, sir.'

Higgins grinned. 'All right, son. Bring him up.'

Soapy Sands was a shifty individual. He had long greasy hair and pronounced sideboards; he wore stove-pipe trousers and his tie was little wider than a boot-lace; his loose jacket might almost have been an overcoat, and sported velvet lapels.

'You can't do this to me,' he said in a piping voice.

'Looks as if we have, don't it?' responded Higgins, towering above him. 'Well? What's your connexion with the gang?'

'I ain't in no gang.'

'All right. You left a motor-bike on a bombed site by the river.'

'I never.'

'H'm! That stupid outfit you wear should call for gloves as well. You left a thumb-print on the handlebar. Unfortunate, wasn't it?'

Soapy Sands peered up into the inspector's face, patently shocked by the information. He wet his lips furtively and then brushed the sleeve of his monstrous jacket across his dribbling nose. 'I—I didn't know it was a—a police bike,' he said at last.

'You what?' blared Higgins. He seized the man by his shoe-string tie and jerked him forward.

Inspector Higgins, almost literally, shook the information from Soapy Sands . . . and was getting angrier with each reluctant disclosure. Apparently Sands had seen a man in goggles arrive within the purlieu of the Water Rat on a motor-cycle; the man must have been in something of a hurry for he made no attempt to protect his machine from possible theft—and this, to Soapy Sands, seemed too good an opportunity to miss. He had watched the man run down the cobbled street to the pub—and the moment he was out of sight had driven off with the motor-cycle. He didn't go too far with it because he wanted to show his face in the Water Rat as quickly as possible to establish some sort of an alibi should he ever be accused of pinching it. His intention was to return to the bombed site and pick it up later – always assuming that nobody else knocked it off again in the meantime. He didn't think the *police* would ever be called in . . . people in the Water Rat didn't generally like to go to the cops when . . .

'This man with the goggles,' interrupted Higgins, accentuating each syllable with a jerk at the tie. 'Who was he?'

'I—I think he is a pal of—of the boss,' quaveringly.

'Tough Tatham, you mean?'

'Y-yes. A pal of Tough Tatham's.' Sands squirmed in the inspector's grasp. 'You—you won't tell the boss, will you?' he pleaded.

Inspector Higgins turned his head to the waiting sergeant. 'Brownall. Get on to Information quickly. Tell 'em to radio the cars again, cancelling my previous instructions and to carry on from where they left off before. They'll probably think I'm crackers but it can't be helped.' Then, as the sergeant hurried out, Higgins turned once more to glare down at

Soapy Sands. 'Don't tell the boss, eh?' he snarled. 'I've a damn' good mind to cart you down there meself and hand you over to him. I'd like to see him carving you up, you little squirt. I haven't had a good laugh for years.' He shook the man so violently that there seemed grave danger of breaking Soapy's neck. 'Blast it! Do you realize what you've done with your footling light-fingers? You've given a murderer a chance to get away. My men might have had him by now if you hadn't laid a false trail with that motor-cycle. I... Oh, to hell with it.' Higgins gave the man a powerful shove; Soapy Sands staggered backwards and collapsed in a chair. The inspector waved a huge forefinger in savage admonition. 'You stay just there till I come and fetch you. If you as much as move I'll come after you and personally hand you over to Tough Tatham on a plate. And I'll go over you meself *first*—for good measure.'

He stalked out of his cubby-hole. Even as he marched down the corridor some of his choler abated. Could it not well be that, by pinching that motor-cycle, Soapy Sands had unwittingly done the police a good turn? It had most effectively removed Trilby Hat's chance of a quick getaway from that part of the world. Let's consider the matter a little more calmly. Trilby Hat rushes to the Water Rat to see Tough Tatham, finds the police already more or less in occupation and promptly scampers back to where he left his means of transport—only to find it gone. What then? He goes to ground somewhere very near indeed, for police patrol cars were very quickly on the scene. Somewhere very near indeed. It wasn't the Water Rat itself, for Higgins had gone over that straight away. But it was quite on the cards that Trilby Hat had friends in the neighbourhood who might be willing to provide sanctuary for a consideration—and Trilby Hat, with fifteen hundred quid in his pocket, would have no difficulty in raising the necessary.

And then what? Trilby Hat would have a very queasy period indeed whilst that part of the world was lousy with cops; then some kind friend would inform him that Soapy Sands had been knocked off and that the police activity had suddenly petered out, and, for some reason or other, he had got unexpected breathing space. His immediate reaction

thereto was unpredictable but Higgins rather thought that he would not stay long in his temporary hole-up. It would be patently futile to search for his missing motor-cycle. So what?

And it seemed to stand out a mile. The last place the police would think of looking for him was one which had already been effectively gone over and to which he had originally been going. . . .

The Water Rat was at the point of closing when Inspector Higgins, with Sergeant Brownall at his side and a squad of police at his heels, arrived on the scene.

Fatty Featherly, bawling a bored incantation 'Time gentlemen, *please*', was shooin' reluctant customers from the premises. The sight of so many advancing police proved much more effective than the stout barman's plaintive pleading; in this part of the world such a spectacle tended to disperse rather than attract a crowd of rubbernecks. Reluctance vanished; erstwhile customers sidled hastily away from contamination.

Fatty, unable to comprehend this phenomenon but guessing that something must be wrong, peeped out of a door and gasped to find Inspector Higgins but a few feet away. The barman turned quickly but was pulled up short as steely fingers grabbed a handful of flesh on his shoulder.

'Oh, no, you don't,' said Higgins.

'Boss! Boss!' Whether the cry was in warning or an appeal for help did not matter. The damage was done. The inspector brushed the fat man to one side and ran forward. The door of that inner room was flung open and the powerful Tough Tatham stood in the doorway.

'So it's you again, is it?' he said, scowling into the inspector's face.

'Yeah! And this time I *have* got a search-warrant.' Higgins delved into the inner pocket of his jacket. 'Want to see it?'

'I'll take your word for it. What are you after this time? Blackleg hooch or something?'

'No. A little more serious than that. I'm after a suspected murderer.'

Tatham's face went very blank but he said nothing.

'You can either hand him over straight away,' continued Higgins, 'and save yourself a lot of bother—or we'll take this place apart until we *do* find him. Please yourself.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Higgins. I haven't long been back from the Yard. Your trailers can tell you I picked no one up on the way. And . . .'

'I see. You prefer the hard way. Stand aside.'

The inspector thought, for one brief moment, that Tough Tatham was going to make an immediate issue of it; then the man sighed and stepped back into the room. As Higgins followed him in, the winsome Mrs Tatham jumped up in alarm.

'W-why, Billy. Whatever is the matter?' she asked as she ran forward and clutched her husband's arm.

'Nothing, dear. Nothing,' said Tatham, gently patting her tiny fingers.

Inspector Higgins stared round the room; it seemed fairly patent that no one could be hiding therein. Nevertheless, he crossed to the window and snagged aside the curtains. To the left was the river; he was glad to see the River Police boat a few feet off-shore. He let the curtains drop back into place and signalled to two police constables waiting in the doorway.

'Stay here with Mr and Mrs Tatham,' he said brusquely. 'They are not to leave this room.'

Mrs Tatham stared up into his face. 'But—but . . . you have no right . . .'

'I'm sorry, madam,' said Higgins gently. '*Billy* will explain.' He walked out of the room, nearly colliding with Sergeant Brownall who was in the corridor outside.

'The bars are empty, sir. The motor-boat is still tied to the jetty. I'll try the upper rooms.'

'Yes. And try the roof as well. I'll lay a hundred to six he's here somewhere. And as we don't want him dodging back into any room already searched, lock it after you and pocket the key.'

'Right, sir.'

'And I'll have a look down the cellars.'

Inspector Higgins passed through the saloon and public bars, still littered with empty glasses and thick with tobacco smoke, lifted a counter flap and edged his way between spirit

bottles on one side and the beer pumps on the other—reflecting, as he did so, that for Fatty Featherly it must be a very tight squeeze. He halted at the top of a flight of stone steps; the thought had occurred that there were cellar flaps outside the building to facilitate the delivery of bulk beer and bottles and that it might be possible for a desperate man suddenly to emerge therefrom to the street and . . . He shrugged his shoulders. There should be enough cops outside to cope with *that*.

He deflected a light switch at the top of the steps and paused with his finger still on the button. 'Hallo-allo-allo,' he muttered. On the third step, crushed almost beyond recognition, was a pair of motoring goggles.

Higgins smiled and took a deep breath. He remembered the incident in Collier Close when he had come off a rather shop-soiled second best in his encounter with Trilby Hat. Perhaps on this occasion the gods would be kinder. He started to descend the steps.

'Is that you, Fatty?' whispered a voice from below.

'I'm afraid not,' said Higgins—and jumped the remainder of the flight.

The cellar was lit by a low-powered bulb in the ceiling, protected by a brass grille; barrels were stacked along one wall, with a bewildering series of pipes therefrom criss-crossing the stone floor with no apparent rhyme nor reason; the opposite wall was lined with wooden crates of bottled beers which looked as unstable as a wall of toy wooden bricks; there was a sloping delivery chute from the closed trap-doors from the street; a huge wicker basket on wheels filled higgledy-piggledy with empty bottles . . .

And an empty bottle hurtled over the inspector's head and crashed on the stone steps behind him. Well, well! Trilby Hat must be unarmed. How nice.

The man was crouched behind that basket of empty bottles. Inspector Higgins charged across the intervening space, tripped incontinently over one of the pipes on the floor and would have sprawled full-length had he not grabbed the top of the wicker basket. As a matter of fact it proved a blessing in disguise, for Trilby Hat, patently disconcerted at this unconventional mode of attack, had no time to get out of the

way; the basket, its castors screaming along the stone floor, and with the inspector's huge weight behind it, crashed into him and knocked him against that uneasy wall of stacked crates.

'Jerusalem!' As Higgins struggled to his feet, his eyes on the swaying crates, he involuntarily held up an arm to ward off the threatening avalanche; he would have been wiser to have kept his eyes on the ball. Trilby Hat was quick to seize his opportunity. It was almost a repeat performance of the Collier Close affair. Higgins sensed rather than saw the pile-driver launched at his head; he swerved just in time. Trilby Hat's bunched fist scraped along the inspector's collar and Higgins let drive with his right. It caught the man full on the chest and jarred the inspector's arm right to the elbow but seemed to have little or no effect.

Higgins countered another savage blow with his forearm; Trilby Hat closed. The pair wrestled for a couple of seconds, then were tripped by one of the stray pipes on the floor. They crashed together with such force that a pipe connected to one of the barrels was snapped off; beer spurted from the fracture, its pungent aroma heightening the already cloying atmosphere of the cellar.

Trilby Hat tried to butt his head into the inspector's face; Higgins promptly grabbed a handful of the man's hair, dragging his head backwards—and suddenly realized that the unshaven chin a foot from his own right fist was an unmissable target. He fired it home. The man went limp and Inspector Higgins crawled from under.

'Are you all right, sir?' It was the somewhat apprehensive voice of Sergeant Brownall from the top of the stone steps.

'More or less,' said Higgins, ruefully wringing beer from the tail of his jacket.

Hell! Now even his best suit was partly ruined! He shook his head, picked up a clean copper measure, filled it from the gushing barrel and had one on the house.

THREATS

INSPECTOR HIGGINS found a spare bung and plugged the leaking barrel—it seemed such a pity for the beer to run needlessly to waste. Sergeant Brownall picked his way across the stone floor and stared downwards at the supine man with the discoloured right eye.

‘So you found him, sir,’ he observed.

‘Looks like it, don’t it? Either of the others on the premises?’

‘No, sir. I didn’t trouble to go on the roof—an unbroken spider’s web, on the bolt of the trap-door leading to it, saved me the trouble. And there was no sign anywhere of either Fanworth or Kenton . . . particularly Fanworth.’ Brownall looked up into the inspector’s face and grinned. ‘None of the clocks were right,’ he added in explanation.

‘H’m! They’re always fast in a pub. Still, to be honest, I didn’t expect to find the others holed up here. I strongly suspect it was *force majeure* that drove *this* cove here’—with a downward jerk of his thumb—‘when he couldn’t find his bike. Let’s have a good look at him.’

Together the two police officers dragged the man across the stone floor and propped him up against the canted delivery chute. Higgins started to go through the man’s clothing.

‘Jerusalem!’ he muttered a few seconds later. ‘He’s got a shoulder holster. I wonder why he didn’t use it when . . .’ He broke off. It was not a shoulder holster. Inspector Higgins pulled from beneath the man’s waistcoat a fat wad of treasury notes.

‘Golly, sir. Fanworth’s fifteen hundred pounds.’

‘Looks like it. Less any commission for recent sanctuary. We can count it later. And . . . Hallo! He seems to have finished his nap.’

Trilby Hat opened his eyes and leered at the two tall men

standing in front of him. It was some seconds before he seemed to grasp the situation. Then he sat up. 'I—I'll kill you for this,' he said, his voice heavy with venom.

'You've done all the killing you're ever likely to, I don't mind telling you,' said Higgins, unsmilingly, as he stared downwards. 'Where's Fanworth?'

'Where *you* won't get him,' was the surprising answer.

The inspector nodded his head. 'Loyal to the last, eh? All right. Get up.'

The man made no effort to move. Inspector Higgins leaned forward. 'I said get up,' he reiterated.

Slowly the man rose to his feet. Higgins stood four-square in front of him. 'And if you care to make a bolt for it, now's your chance,' he said.

There was a period of silence, then Higgins smiled grimly and turned his back. 'Bring him along, son. I'll lead the way.' He stalked across the floor of the cellar and mounted the stone steps. Reluctant feet followed him. A few seconds later he opened the door of the inner room.

Tough Tatham at once jumped to his feet. Higgins eyed him soberly. 'I've found your pal,' he said.

'He's no pal o' mine,' responded Tatham, looking beyond the inspector to Trilby Hat.

'H'm! That's as maybe. And I'm afraid it's *you* now who has laid himself open to a charge. Harboursing a criminal.'

Mrs Tatham jumped to her feet and ran to her husband's side—but Tough Tatham took no notice. He eyed the inspector coldly. 'Harboursing a criminal, eh?' he said. 'It's the first place you'd have to prove I knew he was on the premises. Then you'd have to prove he was a criminal. Then you'd have to prove that I *knew* he was one. And . . .' An expression of pain crossed the man's hard face. 'Oh, to hell with it! You'd do the same for your own brother, wouldn't you—even if he *was* a louse?' He turned again to Trilby Hat. 'You bloody fool,' he snarled with withering contempt.

Trilby Hat stepped forward to glare at his brother; then turned his head to leer at the girl by his side. 'It's all your fault,' he said. 'Ever since he's known you' 's gone all soft. If it hadn't been for *you* . . .'

'If it hadn't been for me you would have been in jail by now,' responded Mrs Tatham with spirit. 'Tough wouldn't leave this place for a holiday because he thought *you* were in trouble. You've been spoiling my life as well as his. You've been a thorn in his side ever since you were knee-high to a slug. It's high time Tough washed his hands of an ill-tempered, lazy, good-for-nothing parasite who . . .'

'You little bitch!' Trilby Hat, before anyone could stop him, took a pace forward and slapped the girl's face. Apparently he was good at that sort of thing. In Collier Close he had treated Miss Langley much the same—but this time reaction was immediate. Tough Tatham let drive; a huge balled fist struck Trilby Hat full in the face. The force was such that the man was knocked clean off his feet; Sergeant Brownall, who was standing behind him, took the full impact and was nearly floored as well.

'That's quite enough of that,' said Higgins mildly yet with inner approval—and stepped in front of Tough Tatham.

Trilby Hat was taken from the Water Rat to Scotland Yard in an ambulance.

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Inspector Higgins, with Sergeant Brownall at his side, also returned to the Yard, the remainder of the squad carrying on with the search for Fanworth and Kenton . . . this time with no bones about it. It was to be a house-to-house inquiry starting at the Water Rat and working back towards Collier Close and with orders to be tough, for there was little likelihood of co-operation from the locals.

And Higgins, at the steering-wheel of his car, was very thoughtful. It seemed patent that it was Fatty Featherly, either with or without Tough Tatham's consent or knowledge, who had given Trilby Hat sanctuary in the cellar of the Water Rat. Probably without Tatham's knowledge at the start, for Tatham had been at the Yard at the time Trilby Hat must have returned to the place. Fatty would be in a bit of a quandary, knowing the man to be Tough Tatham's brother—but, knowing also how Tatham had been dry nursing his brother of late, could have had few qualms in letting the man hide up for a bit.

Yet the knowledge that Trilby Hat was in fact Robert Tatham, the brother of dear Billy Tatham, certainly made plainer much that had hitherto been obscure. Higgins mentally kicked himself for not having inquired before, at the Rosemary Residential Club, for the name of the Fanworth chauffeur. It was quite patent that some of the people there knew it. Oakfield for one. Again the inspector remembered his fantastic interview with the man whilst in the truck of that moving train. Oakfield had admitted then that it was Tatham who had first put him on to the chapel place at Harlbury . . . meaning, of course, Tatham the chauffeur and not Tatham of the Water Rat. Higgins smiled grimly at the recollection. It was he himself who had jumped to the conclusion that it was Tough Tatham to whom Oakfield had been referring. In fact Oakfield had admitted that he had not known the man was called Tough. Not surprising, really, when they were talking about two different men!

And it was Tatham, the chauffeur, who had led Oakfield to Collier Close, not his brother. No wonder Tough Tatham, when questioned, had been so brashly confident that no one ever followed him around without his knowledge. No one ever had! At that same interview Tatham had been brought up short when the name Fanworth was mentioned. And the reason therefor was now apparent. Tough Tatham knew his brother was working for, if not with, the clock man at the club. And when the club was mentioned again during that interview, Tatham had gone all cagey because he had realized that it was his brother who had been followed by Oakfield and Unwin whereas Higgins thought it was himself—and had guessed the reason for the error. Higgins couldn't know that Fanworth's chauffeur and Tough Tatham were brothers . . . in fact he must be totally unaware of his brother's name. And that might mean there was still some chance of keeping his brother out of the business.

Inspector Higgins shook his head from side to side in some measure of bewilderment. There was something about Tough Tatham he couldn't quite make out. That the man was tough he was very sure; that he could also be surprisingly gentle with his wisp of a wife was perhaps understandable; that he could possibly be straight was almost unbelievable.

What had Tough Tatham been doing at Harlbury that time—beside buying cigarettes? Looking for his—um—wayward brother? Could be. And he had tried to phone from that tobacconist's to the call box in Blacksmith Lane. Again to contact his brother? Could be. If so, why? Had Tough Tatham guessed that his brother was mixed up in that wage snatch in the West End and was trying to cover up for him? It looked uncommonly like it. More dry nursing, in fact. And at the expense of his own honeymoon, too! The inspector smiled a little whimsically at the thought.

'Dammit,' he muttered. 'Much more o' this and I'll be *liking* the feller.'

'Pardon, sir?' Sergeant Brownall jerked his head in surprise.

'Nothing, son. I was just thinking.'

'Is that why you've left him still at the Water Rat, sir?'

'So you *did* hear, did you, son? And you *did* guess I was thinking of Tough Tatham, eh? No, my boy. It wasn't because I half like him that I left him there—but because he's got an anchor which will *keep* him there.'

'You mean the little lady, sir?'

'M'yes.' And Inspector Higgins swung the car through the gateway into the courtyard at headquarters.

A few minutes later he was thoughtfully making his way up to his cubby-hole; he hoped his judgement was not at fault. This was twice he had threatened Tough Tatham with arrest and twice he had changed his mind. There was something about the feller—or was it his wife?—which somehow . . . If old Chief Inspector Dryan ever heard of it there'd be hell to pay. They'd been waiting years for Tough Tatham to make a slip and . . .

Inspector Higgins blew out his checks and opened the door of his cubby-hole and there he paused in amazement. Still seated in the chair where he had left him, and apparently petrified, was Soapy Sands.

'Jerusalem! Are you still here?' said Higgins as he marched into the room.

'You—you told me I was to—to stop here till you come back and—and . . .'

'Well, well, well,' heartily. 'So I did. And you haven't moved, I trust?'

'N-no, mister.' Soapy Sands looked, almost pathetically, into the inspector's face.

'Right. Then move now—and move fast.' Higgins jerked a fat thumb towards the open doorway.

Soapy Sands edged himself off his seat. 'W-where do you want me to g-go?'

'I want you to get to hell out of it. Scram, man. Scram. Before I change my mind.'

Soapy Sands stared unbelievably into the inspector's eyes, sidled warily round him and then scuttled out of the room; Higgins could hear his feet pattering along the corridor outside. He did hope the little waif wouldn't get lost in the vast building; he was about as tough as Tatham's little finger.

Inspector Higgins closed the door, then seated himself at his desk and started to count a fat wad of pound notes. He counted the first hundred and used that as a rough check on the remainder—an exact count could come later—and computed that the total was some twenty or thirty pounds short of the presumed fifteen hundred . . . a rather heavy fee to pay for temporary haven during the short period Robert Tatham had been holed up before returning to the Water Rat.

The great point about it all, though, was the fact that this money was now denied to Fanworth—assuming it had ever been Trilby Hat's intention to give it to him. And Fanworth without cash should be less hard to find than Fanworth with fifteen hundred smackers in his pocket . . . Or so one would think.

Inspector Higgins swept the money into the drawer of his desk and was once more confronted with the official photograph there of Tough Tatham. He stared at it for a long time. Shorty Webb had denied knowing the man and his voice had carried conviction. And why *should* Shorty Webb know Tough Tatham if Tatham was on the up and up? Higgins sighed deeply and slammed the drawer shut. He'd got Tough Tatham on the brain.

Let's forget him for a minute—if we can. Concentrate on Fanworth and Kenton, both presumably short of funds. Would they stay together? The inspector cast his mind back to the first time he had met either of them. It was in the miniature courtyard at the rear of the Rosemary Club.

Kenton had just paid for his temerity in kicking the inspector's rear when Fanworth had arrived on the scene. And Fanworth had treated the gateman with a large measure of contempt . . . stirred him with his foot, told him he had probably asked for trouble and instructed him to get on with whatever he was supposed to be doing. And Kenton had taken it lying down—literally, come to that! Fanworth was the boss, all right. And as such, would he lumber himself up with an underling when on the run? H'm! Not unless he had to.

One thing, Higgins had not come across any passport when he had searched that room with the clocks, which might mean that Fanworth carried it with him. Still, seaports and airports had been warned to be on the look-out. Yet, was it likely that Fanworth would use an orthodox route to get out of the country? The inspector shook his head in answer to his own question. And that seemed to suggest a tramp steamer. The river again. Customs and Excise, though warned of possibilities, couldn't be expected to tooth-comb every tramp steamer leaving the Port of London. With the connivance of the Master and/or the crew *any* fugitive might slip through.

Inspector Higgins scowled at his telephone, lifted it from its cradle and dialled. Within seconds he was connected once more with the Thames River Police depot and talking to the officer-in-charge, requesting further co-operation.

'What *is* all this, Higgy? Another big idea?'

'No, old man. It's more like a forlorn hope.'

'W-e-l-l,' responded the other slowly, 'I suppose it could be done. But the launch is out for the moment on one of our nasty routine jobs. But it may be back by the time you could reach our pontoon. If not, you'll have to wait a bit—and then I'll go along with you.'

'Fair enough, old man. I'll be seeing you.' Higgins cradled the instrument and rose to his feet. Forlorn hope was indeed a fair assessment; yet everything seemed to point to the fact that the two men were either holed up somewhere on the river or had already left for the open sea. Their escape from Collier Wharf must surely have been by boat after the Ocelot had been ditched in the river there . . . and presumably Fanworth had arrived by boat before that hold-up in the

warehouse . . . And Fanworth was the actual owner of the warehouse, so presumably *must* have some other river connexions . . . It was a forlorn hope all right. Just clutching at straws. Higgins smiled grimly. At least the metaphor was not inapt.

He picked up Sergeant Brownall on the way out. They reached the River Police depot just as the police launch was pulling alongside. And it was at once apparent what its nasty routine job had been—the retrieving from the river of another unfortunate who had grown tired of life.

The officer-in-charge waved a hand at the inspector. ‘Shan’t be long,’ he called in a cheerful voice which seemed somewhat out of place.

Higgins and Brownall stepped on the pontoon, keeping well out of the way.

The crew of the launch acted with an expeditious reverence indicative of much melancholy practice. The body was transferred from the launch to the pontoon. The officer-in-charge flicked the covering tarpaulin to peer underneath with an indifference almost ghoulish. And then he seemed to freeze into immobility. ‘Hey! This feller was never drowned,’ he said, pulling the tarpaulin clear. ‘Hell, no. He’s been shot.’

Inspector Higgins hurried forward. Then he, too, paused as if petrified.

The dead man was Kenton, the gatekeeper of the Rosemary Residential Club.

Chapter Twenty-seven

DELAY

INSPECTOR HIGGINS took charge and his colleague of the River Police was glad to let him. Dr Pape, the police surgeon attached to headquarters, was quickly on the scene and the usual room at the depot was placed at his disposal—and he seemed to be taking the devil's own time in his examination of the dead man.

Higgins chafed at the seeming delay but was determined not to go off at half-cock on this occasion. On the face of it, the murder of Kenton seemed so unnecessary . . . at least so far as Fanworth was concerned. What could Fanworth possibly have gained? True, he had ridded himself of an encumbrance. But what could Kenton possibly know which would be inimical to Fanworth and which the police did not already know? Surely Fanworth did not imagine that the police were unaware of his identity? He had certainly disguised his voice in that warehouse and had kept in the dark during the whole business there. Of course, he was unaware that his characteristic reference to precise time had completely given himself away. So it *might* be he still thought that Kenton was the only man who knew who he was . . .

Inspector Higgins blew out his checks. It would all come out in the wash . . .

Dr Pape emerged at last.

'Well,' demanded Higgins, with more truculence than he had intended.

'Now don't bite my head off, Higgy.' The police surgeon, himself noted for an unreasonable irascibility, peeked angrily up into the inspector's face.

'Sorry, doc,' responded the inspector in a contrite tone of voice. 'But this business is getting me down. Can you help us?' humbly.

'H'm!' Pape emitted a mollified grunt. 'This is as far as

it goes. At a guess the feller was probably shot in the early hours this morning—say round about sixish—and I doubt whether the full autopsy will alter that guess by much. And here's the bullet which killed him. I'm no expert but it looks uncommonly like one from a police automatic.'

'Jerusalem, my happy home!'

'Know anything about that, then?'

'I'm afraid so, doc. I was relieved of *my* automatic last night.'

'My hat, Higgy. That's not nice. There'll be hell to pay.'

'You're telling *me*.' Inspector Higgins took a very deep breath. 'All right, doc. Many thanks. You get on with your grisly business—and I'll try to get along with mine.' He shrugged his shoulders in resignation and crossed to the officer-in-charge.

And he quickly made known his precise wants. With six o'clock in the morning as the point of focus, was it possible to calculate, through known tidal speeds and movements, where the body might have entered the river? They knew where it had actually been found and the precise time it had been found and . . .

'I'll do my best, Higgy. But it'll be very much of a hit-or-miss sort of business.'

'Can't help that, old man. We've got to start somewhere.'

More necessary delay. It was becoming frightening. Higgins consoled himself with his pipe, pacing up and down the deck of the pontoon. This was the third death in this wretched case. First Cockell, then Langley and now Kenton. All connected with the Rosemary Residential Club. And in Kenton's pockets had been found a bunch of keys, one of which would assuredly open the gates at the rear of the club. Was it possible that another would open—at least, before the lock had been changed—the room of the secretary's office there? The police still had the key which had been found in 'Langley's pocket, so it would be easy to check. And if it tallied, what then? Was Kenton the one who had murdered Langley? After all, according to the chairman, it was Fanworth who had introduced Kenton to the club. Hitherto the inspector had reasoned that it was the dead Cockell's key which might have been used on that occasion but . . .

Hell! What was the use of all this speculation? Time to ponder was if and when the keys matched. Still, it was a point to be remembered.

The officer-in-charge came up with a sheet of paper in his hand and shaking his head apologetically. 'It just can't be done, Higgy,' he said. 'There are too many imponderables. All I've managed to work out is what you probably know already: the feller could have been dumped almost anywhere hereabouts if he had been dead for any length of time before he was thrown in. And even if we assume he was both shot and dumped at the same time—six o'clock this morning—then we've still got the same old familiar stretch . . . somewhere between the Water Rat and Collier Wharf.' He shook his head again and shrugged. 'Sorry, Higgy, but it's the best I can do.'

Inspector Higgins squared his shoulders. 'Right. Then there's nothing more to be said. Many thanks for trying, though. Between the Water Rat and Collier Wharf it *is*, then. And the sooner we get down to it the better.' He raised inquiring eyebrows. 'You can help?' he asked.

'Of course.'

'Right, then. Let's get cracking.'

Within seconds the police launch was once more on its familiar journey, with Higgins and Brownall in the cockpit, together with the officer-in-charge, heading down-stream at a goodly rate of knots. It did not slacken speed until Collier Wharf came into sight, with an unfamiliar cluster of small boats drifting off-shore.

'You'd think they'd never seen a hole in a wall before—or a salvaged car, for that matter,' said the officer. 'What's your exact programme, Higgy?'

'I want to search every moored vessel between here and the Water Rat,' uncompromisingly.

'My hat! You've got a job on.'

'I know. How far does your authority run?'

'Not so far as that, I'm afraid.'

'H'm! Mine'll *have* to. We'll take the nearby barges for a start.'

'You'll hear some language,' and the officer-in-charge grinned.

There was no answering smile on the inspector's face. 'I'm no mean performer, if it comes to that,' he admitted. 'Let's get crackin'.'

Whether or not it was the launch's blue pennant which did the trick, but their authority was not even questioned. Belatedly the inspector realized that Customs and Excise, with their undoubted boarding rights, would have been a much better bet—but it was too late for that now. It was not until three barges had been boarded and searched that Higgins realized the magnitude of the task he had set himself. There was but one relieving incident and that was when the officer-in-charge was greeted by name and cheerfully asked if he was coming aboard for his usual snifter—at which he had coughed deprecatingly.

Inspector Higgins stepped wearily back into the waiting launch. 'Thi's'll take us a month of Sundays,' he said dejectedly. 'I'll have to get reinforcements if we're ever going to finish. I . . .' He broke off and stared at the officer-in-charge. 'Didn't you tell me,' he asked in a quickening tone of voice, 'that Tough Tatham and his lady actually *circled* some of the barges here?'

'That's right, Higgy. Farther down-stream.'

'And that they might perhaps have stopped somewhere thereabouts?'

'Well, not exactly. It was just that occasionally they went on the blind side . . .'

'Let's have a look at the ones they circled. It *migh* 'e a short cut.'

In actual fact it wasn't a short cut, though little time was wasted—for the barges were empty, literally, with no one aboard and without any cargo.

'H'm!' The disgruntled Higgins stared back at the receding line of barges. 'I can't imagine what Tough Tatham's interest could have been in those,' he muttered. 'Or his wife's, for that matter. Dammit! They even *look* empty.'

'Perhaps that's why, sir,' ventured Sergeant Brownall. . .

'Eh?' Inspector Higgins turned to leer at his underling with one jaundiced eye . . . and his expression slowly changed. 'Son,' he said, with a sort of surprised commendation in the

tone of his voice. 'I think you've got something.' He at once turned to the officer-in-charge. 'Any more patently empty barges knocking around?' he asked.

'One or two.'

'Right. Well, let's look *them* over.'

The launch chugged away and soon pulled alongside a long dirty barge which seemed absolutely derelict; it was already on a cant as the receding tide had left it resting on the silt of the river bed. In fact there was no need to board it at all because, by merely standing in the launch, the pronounced list enabled the inspector to view the entire empty hold. He sniffed derisively—and wished he hadn't, for the stench from within was decidedly obnoxious.

'No dice, Higgy?'

'Not so as you'd notice. Let's get along to Exhibit B.'

'Righto!' The launch pulled away. 'Our next—um—*objet d'art* is a lighter with a rear cabin. Almost a landmark one might say, it having been here since the Norman Conquest or thereabouts. Why it has never sunk I can't say. And be careful when you go aboard for the additional weight may be the last straw.' He smiled up into the inspector's face and waved an airy hand towards a vessel moored off-shore. '*Voilà!* And if there's anyone aboard *that* I'll eat my hat.'

'Perhaps you'd better start on it now,' suggested Higgins, involuntarily squaring his shoulders and experiencing a measure of rising excitement.

'What do you mean?'

'Look at *that*,' said the inspector—and pointed to the top of the small cylindrical buoy to which the lighter's hawser was attached. Resting thereon was a discarded cigarette packet; that it could not have been there long was patent, for its bright yellow colour was untarnished and it looked as dry as a bone. It could not possibly have been flung there from the river bank; it was barely possible it might have been thrown from a passing boat; but the most likely explanation was that it had been tossed from the lighter itself.

'Brownall, son,' said Higgins. 'This is *it*. I'll go aboard first. You follow. And mind how you go, for Fanworth's armed.' The inspector devoutly wished now that he had indented for another automatic but it was too late for that

sort of wishful thinking. He turned to the officer-in-charge. 'Pull up as near to the cabin as you can—and as soon as we're aboard lay off and stand by. You'll soon know if we need any help.' The launch drifted alongside; the moment its fender touched the lighter, Higgins leapt aboard; his feet thudded across the narrow deck to the cabin door. A second later the sergeant was by his side.

Higgins pointed to the foot of the door, to the raised sill which prevented shipped water spilling into the cabin. 'Mind you don't trip over that,' he admonished—and flung the door open. 'All right, Fanworth,' he called loudly. 'You can come out now.'

Nothing happened. It was sheer anticlimax. Higgins scowled; then pulled his torch from his pocket, pressing the button.

'Jerusalem!' He stepped carefully over the sill of the door and advanced cautiously into the cabin.

He had found Fanworth right enough—and it was immediately apparent why the man had put up no semblance of opposition. He was trussed in a cocoon of greasy rope, with his hands behind him; a handkerchief was tied savagely tight across his mouth; there was a livid bruise on his temple; his frightened eyes blinked into the torch's ray.

Inspector Higgins crossed over, and with gentle fingers tried to ease the knot of the gag. It was no use. He pulled out his knife and at last sawed the sodden mass free. Fanworth took a shuddering gulp of air.

'W-what's the time?' he gasped.

It was so characteristic that on a different occasion it might have been comic. Higgins started to saw at the greasy rope. Mr Fanworth started to mutter—and it seemed sheer gibberish . . . delirium? . . . hysteria? . . . The scowling Higgins leaned forward to catch the words. The man's voice rose almost to a hoarse shout.

'Two stroke C eight one five two nine seven.' He paused and his breathing became rapid, panting. 'Two stroke C . . . eight . . . one . . . f-five . . .' His voice trailed away, his chin sank to his chest.

Inspector Higgins lifted him up in his powerful arms. 'Get the launch alongside, Brownall,' he said. 'This cove

needs a doctor—and quick. We'll run him back to the depot. Doc Pape should still be there.'

Even as the inspector carried the man to the launch he could still hear a cabalistic muttering, over and over again, of the queer incantation.

Yes. Fanworth was certainly a whale for figures.

The River Police depot had evidently been warned by the launch's radio of the need for Dr Pape's services, for he was waiting on the pontoon when they arrived.

'What d'you take this for?' he demanded with his usual irascibility. 'A casualty clearing station or something?'

Higgins, with Fanworth in his arms, stepped from the launch.

'He's hurt, doc. Badly,' he said shortly.

'H'm! So he is. All right, Higgy. Bring him along in and let's have a look at him.'

The police surgeon led the way to his room; the inspector followed. 'Gently he deposited his burden on a couch; then, carefully averting his eyes from that other still form on a trestle, he crept out again.

Chapter Twenty-eight

ENLIGHTENMENT

INSPECTOR HIGGINS, a worried frown on his face, stared unwinkingly at Sergeant Brownall. 'Well, son,' he said rhetorically, 'where do we go from here?'

'It is a mess, isn't it, sir?'

'You're telling *me*! All my ideas are wrong. Here have I been casting Fanworth as the villain of the piece and he turns out to be the victim. It's sort of . . . sort of . . .'

'We're back where we started, sir,' suggested Brownall helpfully.

'Dammit! We're farther back than that. We haven't even started.'

'Do you think Tatham's brother is the prime mover, sir?'

'Frankly, I don't. He's too much of a hot-head.'

'You know what he said, sir, when you asked him where Fanworth was . . . where *you* wouldn't get him.'

'Yes. I had that in mind. It makes more sense now. It wasn't loyalty, after all—as I thought at the time . . . but it's a cinch Tatham's brother knew where Fanworth was imprisoned. I'm half wondering whether it might not be a split in the camp—with each man for himself. *That* might be the explanation. And yet . . .'

Higgins broke off and shook his head in doubt. 'I strongly suspect that Fanworth has been in that barge practically ever since his Ocelot car reached Collier Close yesterday . . . and that means . . .'

He broke off again. 'Look here, son. I saw you making a note of the number Fanworth kept on repeating. What exactly was it?'

Sergeant Brownall pulled his note-book from his pocket. 'Er . . . 2/ C 8 1 5 2 9 7.'

'H'm! And what do you make of *that*?'

'I thought it might be the number of a treasury note, sir.'

'Not quite long enough for that . . . unless it was a very aged note. You remember what he told Miss Langley?'

That he had but to see a number once and thereafter the effort would be to forget it rather than remember? It was probably the last set of figures he saw before getting cracked on the temple. It would sort of stick in his mind in any case and it would go round and round ever since—to the exclusion of all else.'

'But the first thing he said, sir, *wasn't* that string of numbers. He asked the time.'

'Jerusalem! So he did. Then what . . .' Dammit! He might have been trying to *tell* us something. Let's think.' Higgins scowled unseeingly at the launch. Then suddenly jerked into alertness. 'Hell, son. There's one thing we *know* Fanworth's done since he left the club in his car—he's signed a cheque for fifteen hundred quid.'

'Golly, yes, sir.'

Inspector Higgins fished his own cheque book from his pocket to glance at the serial numbers. 'Dammit, son. Those figures *could* have been the number of the cheque he actually signed. Though what help that's going to be I just can't *r* . . . And why *that* number should be of any more significance to Fanworth than the one which preceded it or followed it in his cheque book . . . Jerusalem! I've got it! It stuck in his mind because it was *not* one of his own cheques.'

'But—but it would have to be of the same bank and the same branch . . . or else the cashier there . . .'

'That's the point. Here! Come on, son. A break at last. You've already seen the manager there. Let's see him again.' Higgins started to race for his car.

'The bank'll be closed, sir, by this time,' said Brownall lugubriously as he opened the car door.

'To the public, maybe. But the staff'll still be there . . . we hope.'

It was a mad journey from the River Police depot to that branch of the London and Southern Counties Bank; it was essential to get there before the staff left but, even if he was unlucky in this respect, Inspector Higgins was determined to *rake* out some bank official who could help, even if it took the rest of the day.

And the branch *was* closed to the public but, in response to repeated banging on the door, a startled face eventually

peered above the frosted glass of the large outer window and Sergeant Brownall made frantic signs.

'It's the manager, sir,' he said. 'I think he's recognized me.'

The door was at last opened; the two police officers were admitted and the door closed and locked again.

'It's about that fifteen hundred pound Fanworth cheque,' said Higgins—in an ominous tone of voice.

Apparently this was the correct line of approach; it was patent that the manager had had his moments of unease over the cheque ever since the sergeant had visited him earlier on. He was immediately vociferously emphatic that the cheque was in order and the signature undoubtedly that of Mr Fanworth.

'I'm not questioning that,' said Higgins. 'It's the distinctive number I'm concerned with.'

'The number? That doesn't mean a thing.'

'I'm afraid it does. We strongly suspect that it was *not* one of Mr Fanworth's cheques which was used.'

'But—but that's impossible. It would have to be one of *our* cheques or we should never have looked at it and . . .'

'Why not find out?' suggested Higgins, in a milder tone of voice than he felt like using.

'I'm afraid . . . um—— You see, when the cheque was cashed this morning, Mr Fanworth's chauffeur asked us to post on his pass-book sheets and the cancelled cheques and . . .'

'Ah!' The inspector let out a deep heartfelt sigh. *So that* was how it was proposed to get back the tell-tale cancelled cheque. He had been wondering why such an almighty risk had been taken in using a cheque which had not come from Fanworth's cheque book without some means of retrieving it before the police discovered to whom it really belonged. 'And has the stuff been posted yet?' he asked.

'I'll see.' The manager, thoroughly apprehensive by now, hurried away. He was back in next to no time with a large white envelope in his hand. Printed in large letters on the left-hand corner was the word 'PRIVATE' and it was addressed to Mr Fanworth at the Rosemary Residential Club.

'We're lucky,' said the manager as he ran a shaking forefinger under the flap.

'I'll say we are.'

he was unaware. 'And what about mail for the residents?' he asked.

'Same thing. There are no separate letter boxes for them, you know. And there's only the one address, come to that.' Mr Newport grinned knowingly. 'That's another thing I'm going to alter, I might say. Any resident is entitled to get his letters as soon as delivered, and not have to fish 'em out of our rack. I'm going to see that he does. And then, when that Christmas staff list I told you about, starts its rounds . . .'

Mr Newport left it at that, spread his hands and beamed.

'I can see you know your onions, son,' said Higgins. 'But these innovations of yours will have to wait, I'm afraid. Till over tomorrow, anyhow. And you've got a temporary new member who isn't going to pay any sub. Now listen. . .'

.

Inspector Higgins sat in the vestibule of the Rosemary Residential Club patently engrossed in his morning paper; occasionally he even turned a page. He had explained to the somewhat dubious doorkeeper that he was waiting for Mr Fanworth and that he didn't want to miss him. He omitted to state, however, that Mr Fanworth, though now semi-conscious, was in no fit state yet to return to his suite at the club. Still, it was as good a gag as any—for those interested had been at pains to qualify Mr Fanworth as the villain of the piece. That studied pause in the warehouse at Collier Close, presumably indicative of a characteristic glance at a wrist-watch, was a beautiful example. And why shouldn't the police be waiting here ready to pounce when the man returned? Someone would probably have a good laugh at the thought.

The inspector turned another page of his newspaper noisily, meticulously folding it back into its crease, shook it and started to study the fat stock prices.

He smiled. Jerusalem, but wasn't his pal in the River Police thirty last night when he had phoned to ask him to try to retrieve that empty cigarette packet from the top of that cylindrical buoy? 'Why didn't you think of that at the time?'

he had asked—testily—and with good reason. And the inspector's own response: 'Yeah, why didn't I?' hadn't perhaps been too happily phrased. Still, fingerprints *were* fingerprints . . . and he really ought to have thought of it at the time.

Hallo-allo-allo. Here *was* the post. A large batch of letters tied together with official sisal string. The postman and the doorkeeper exchanged sultry pleasantries; then the doorkeeper slipped the string from the packet and studied the contents, turning over occasional envelopes to look at any additional superscription and not uninterested in post-marks. He read a couple of post-cards. Then sauntered to the rack.

This was a flat rectangular cabinet plugged to the wall, with pigeon-holes of varied sizes—doubtlessly dictated by experience—and lettered alphabetically. He hummed to himself as he filed the letters in the respective places. And a fat white envelope was duly deposited in the pigeon-hole labelled F.

So the doorkeeper was in the clear. Well, well!

It was a longer wait than Inspector Higgins had anticipated; he would have thought that the culprit would have wasted no time in getting hold of that cancelled cheque. Still, whoever he was, perhaps he was wise—any break from general routine might well be noticed and remarked upon.

Higgins dived behind his paper. Mr Unwin had arrived. He merely took the letters from the U hole, riffled them through his fingers and replaced them. And he was followed by a very subdued Mr Oakfield, who merely glanced at the rack and passed it by.

One or two more members went by.

And then the fat white envelope in the F pigeon-hole was gone. Had the inspector not been very much on the qui vive he would never have seen its going.

He rose quietly to his feet. Half a minute later he was standing outside a door which had closed but a few moments before. He squared his broad shoulders, then silently turned the handle.

The torn white envelope was already on the floor; the man within the room was agitatedly thumbing through a pile of cancelled cheques. Higgins smiled grimly.

'I shouldn't bother, Mr Quenlock,' he said equably. 'It isn't there.'

The man turned; his usually benevolent countenance was suffused with fury. His hand darted to his jacket pocket as Higgins leapt across the intervening space; then Quenlock's comparatively puny wrist was in an iron grip. Slowly the inspector dragged the hand from the pocket. His own police automatic was in the fingers. What a slice o' luck! Perhaps there wouldn't be such an awful stink after all, when it came to explanations. Carefully he prised it free.

'B-blast you, Higgins,' said Quenlock, struggling to release his wrist. 'I should have killed you in that warehouse when I had the chance.'

'Perhaps you should have done,' agreed Higgins in a benign tone of voice. 'But it's too late now, I'm afraid.' Then his voice hardened. 'Kim on! I want you, you murdering thug.'

Chapter Twenty-nine

INTERPRETATION

CHIEF INSPECTOR DRYAN, seated at his desk, held his horn-rimmed spectacles by the ear hooks and swung them back and forth like a pendulum from one of Mr Fanworth's clocks; he was in a much more benevolent mood than when last Inspector Higgins had been called into conference—the famous occasion when the inspector had more or less blazed a trail from the Rosemary Residential Club to the Water Rat, taking in a hostel for girls on the way.

'So you've sewn it all up, have you, Higgy?' he said, nodding his head in pleased commendation.

'I think so, sir,' responded the inspector, with a somewhat spurious modesty, 'thanks to young Brownall's original hunch about Langley's supposed suicide. Now I know what I *do* know, I've been checking up on Quenlock. I'm quite convinced that he originally joined the Rosemary Club with the idea of listening and learning from any chit-chat from the members. Whether or not it is cause and effect, but Mrs Egmont, the breeder of Siamese cats, has a cousin who is a member; and that Mayor of Daybourne—you will remember that trunk call from there to the kiosk in Blacksmith Lane—well, *he* is a country member of the club. And that wage snatch, too—one of the directors of the firm concerned is a member of the club. And I don't doubt we shall find others when we check up on our unsolved cases.'

'Yes. It's easy to be wise after the event.'

Higgins coughed, thinking of that Ocelot search during the night. 'Yessir, I *had* noticed that,' he observed. Then, noting the gleam in the chief inspector's eye, hastened on. 'And Quenlock making himself generally affable and willing, gets on the Committee there and finally becomes chairman—voluntary jobs which no one particularly wants, but presenting a load of the sort of opportunities he is looking for. And he

realized the possibilities of that small quadrangle at the rear exit and the adjacent work-room—ideal for a quick interchange of number plates and so forth. And this is more or less controlled by Mr Fanworth.'

'Ay, yes. The clock man.'

Inspector Higgins grinned widely. 'No, sir. The *ex* clock man. When he was well enough I went back with him to his suite at the club—to check up whether or not anything had been taken whilst he was away—and when he first saw his precious clocks again I thought he was going to burst into tears. Some were slow, some were stopped, and the chiming so irregular as to be almost continuous. And then a beatific expression of utter relief crossed his face at the thought of his release from the tyranny of time. He walked round and stopped the blinkin' lot—and you could almost *hear* the ensuing silence. And one of his clocks was actually a safe, with a false clock front, where he kept his cheque book and valuables. So his clocks *had* served some useful purpose, after all. You see, sir, Quenlock couldn't find his cheque book when he wanted it in such a hurry—and that really broke the case. And, incidentally, it was Quenlock who had written the number of that telephone kiosk on the paper in the tray beneath Fanworth's instrument. When I asked Fanworth the number he told me it straight away. He most certainly is a whale for figures with his photographic mind.'

'Actually it saved his life, didn't it?' said Dryan, sagely nodding his head.

'Yes, sir, I suppose it did. But before his—um—reform he was an easy-going old fossil provided you kept both eyes on a clock and were punctual to a second. And Quenlock, knowing this, introduced Tough Tatham's brother to him as a chauffeur with a scrupulous regard to time. And then he, in turn, gets Fanworth to recommend Kenton for the job of gateman—though I expect Quenlock would have given it to him in any case . . . Fanworth's recommendation was merely the dotting of an I. And then the possibilities of that warehouse in Collier Close were noted by Robert Tatham, the chauffeur. You see, sir, Fanworth owned the place and although it was useless as a warehouse, it was not too far from the club—and as his application to have the courtyard there

roofed over had been turned down time and time again by the Committee—you can see Quenlock's hand in that—he was more or less forced to use the tunnel of the warehouse as a temporary garage. And Robert Tatham kept his motorcycle there, too. Incidentally, that is another reason why the inner rather than the outer room there was used to store loot—in case Fanworth might choose to look inside the door from the tunnel at any time.' Inspector Higgins spread his hands. 'And what with the call box in Blacksmith Lane as a connecting link and with the dull-witted Shorty Webb to take and relay calls it was a very nice set-up.'

Chief Inspector Dryan nodded his head. 'Quite,' he muttered.

'Yes, sir. It was a very happy combination until Cockell, the then secretary, and Oakfield and Unwin, his snooker pals, started snooking around.'

'You think the three were working together, then?'

'Oh, yes, sir. Sure of it. That was why Oakfield fainted when he learned that Cockell had been murdered. It had been brought rather violently home to him the strength of the fire with which he had been playing. Hitherto he had probably thought that Cockell had found some sizeable pickings and had promptly double-crossed his partners. But that's by the way. Anyhow, sir, Cockell goes along to that chapel place. It was probably the gang's dump before they took over the warehouse at Collier Close. And Cockell arrives there at a most inconvenient time and is promptly hot for his pains and dumped into a passing goods train.' Higgins looked up and smiled. 'After all, sir,' he said, 'I *do* know that goods trains are occasionally held up there by the signals.'

'Er, yes, Higgy. A most commendable piece of tenacity chasing Oakfield on that occasion.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Higgins unblushingly. 'And so the Rosemary Club is shy one secretary. And Quenlock promptly advertises for another. And is very choosy. He is not looking so much for ability as for—um—circumstances. I've checked up with the other applicants, including Mr Newport who eventually got the job, and it seems that Quenlock wanted a man with no outside ties whatever.'

'But, dammit, man. Langley had a sister,' interposed Dryan.

‘Quite, sir. And I’m positive Langley boxed clever—as *he* thought—and suppressed her altogether. He wanted the job badly and if the chairman needed a man with no relations—well, he was willing to oblige. But Quenlock was looking for a ready-made fall guy . . . someone who could commit “suicide” with the same gun which had killed Cockell. It was only a question of waiting till Cockell’s body turned up. But it was a long wait. Too long, in fact. I think that Langley must have seen something fishy in the courtyard below his window and duly reported it to his chairman. And that was literally fatal. Quenlock undoubtedly had a key to the secretary’s office; the gun is conveniently left for Langley to find and to get his fingerprints on in a natural way.’

‘M’yes. We *are* apt to be a little chary if the prints on a death gun don’t look natural,’ observed the chief inspector, gravely nodding his head.

‘Quite, sir. And Langley is eventually shot with it. And you can bet Quenlock was careful not to leave any of *his* prints on it. And so he gets his engineered suicide verdict—and everything is hunky-dory . . . merely a question of waiting for Cockell’s body to turn up, dovetailing bullets and jumping to the requisite conclusions. . . . And we’d saddle Langley with Cockell’s murder and everything in the garden would be lovely.’ Inspector Higgins grinned again. ‘And then young Brownall gets his hunch.’

‘Good for Brownall.’

‘And Brownall is slugged by Tatham’s brother when, following Oakfield, he gets too warm near Collier Close. And then we have that wage snatch in the West End. Fanworth’s car, with false number plates, is used. Quenlock probably driving, with Robert Tatham making the snatch. Then the quick run to the club to remove the false plates. A quick back out because I’m in the courtyard and then a quick slip in again when Fanworth so conveniently shows me his clocks. Then Tatham runs the car back to Collier Close and Quenlock takes the loot into the club. He promptly phones that call box to give Shorty Webb my description and instructions to follow.’ Higgins coughed deprecatingly. ‘He—um—he rather stressed my—um . . . He described me as being—um—on the stout side, which, of course, is ridiculous.

And, incidentally, he used a similar expression about me when he held me up in that warehouse . . .’

Chief Inspector Dryan complacently slapped his own ample girth. ‘Don’t worry, Higgy. I can still give you pounds and pounds. Still, in its way, it was a pointer to it being the same man.’

‘Er—yessir. And Quenlock quickly guesses there is something radically wrong there at the kiosk—and—um—acts accordingly. And Robert Tatham, returning from Collier Close, spots Miss Langley leaving the club by the rear exit, follows her and promptly slaps her down when she reaches Collier Close.’

‘And slapped you down, too, I understand.’

Higgins coughed. ‘Quite, sir. And then Tough Tatham starts to complicate things, checking up on his—er—wayward brother. But the real co’lapse of the set-up began when Mr Fanworth, the whale for figures, found that difference in his car mileage and knew it had been used without his knowledge. I’m quite sure that soon after I saw the car leave the club on the last occasion. Fanworth tackled his chauffeur about it—and Robert Tatham realized that the jig was up. He at once drove the car, on some pretext or other, to Fanworth’s “garage” in Collier Close—and in next to no time Fanworth is a prisoner in that lighter. And Quenlock, too, when I turned up those number plates in Kenton’s workshop, must have known that the club’s peculiar usefulness was at an end. And then Miss Langley rolls up again at Collier Close and he, too, has to be made a prisoner. The whole racket was quickly falling to pieces. Was it possible to save anything out of the wreck? Yes. They could bleed Fanworth white before bumping him off. Cash first and perhaps securities later. But Fanworth was not carrying his cheque book. Still, the club used the same branch. One of their cheques . . . It was a risk, of course, but the cancelled cheque could be retrieved later. Perhaps there wasn’t such a risk after all. And Fanworth, a mild little man really, under duress signs a cheque for fifteen hundred pounds.’ Again the inspector spread his hands expressively. ‘And that was that. I had been too big a risk after all. It rovided the vital clue.’

Chief Inspector Dryan again nodded his head in approbation. 'Very nice work, Higgy,' he said.

'Any questions, sir?' asked Higgins brightly.

The chief inspector frowned heavily and started to polish the lenses of his spectacles with the lining of his jacket. 'M'yes. Why bump Kenton off?' he asked.

'Because Kenton was on a par with Shorty Webb. His point of contact with the gang was Robert Tatham. And when Quenlock had to use him to dump that car at Collier Wharf, Kenton learned who the formidable "boss" really was and that was that. Quenlock shot him with the automatic he had taken from me—and it might well be that he hoped to use it again somehow, to repeat the business with that other gun and Langley and Cockell—he was a great lad for that sort of idea.'

'To implicate *you* in something or other, eh? Well, well.' Chief Inspector Dryan held his glasses up to the light to squint at each lens. 'And who telephoned Master Langley just before he was shot?' he asked.

'We only have Quenlock's word that *anybody* did,' responded Higgins. 'But I've had a word with Tough Tatham, who belatedly admits that he rang up the club about that time trying to contact his brother. The Fanworth number is unlisted, so he tried the club. And a strange voice answered—Langley hadn't been secretary long—and so Tough Tatham, always a cagey sort of cove, merely rang off without saying a word.'

'H'm! And why did Shorty Webb go all coy when he spotted Fanworth in that group photograph?' asked the chief inspector.

'That had *me* fogged at one time, sir, but it was Fanworth's chauffeur who was the point of connexion—and Shorty knew *him* right enough. Webb realized we were getting mighty near.'

'Did you find their store of explosives, by the way?'

'Yes, sir. On the lighter where we found Fanworth.'

'Ay, yes. And that cigarette packet on the buoy there?'

'Quenlock's prints all over it, sir. I won't say he was careless over that—but he was definitely unlucky.' Inspector Higgins nodded a spurious commiseration. 'And to cross a

final T, the bunch of keys we found on Kenton did not include a duplicate of the original of Langley's office.'

The telephone bell rang; Chief Inspector Dryan lifted the instrument, listened for a moment, then handed it over to Inspector Higgins. 'It's Miss Langley, Higgy. I wonder what *she* wants.'

'Is that you, Inspector Higgins? I'm sorry to disturb you, but you *did* ask me to keep you advised as to my movements.' There was a lilting chuckle in her voice and a male murmuring in the background. 'You see, Mr Fanworth wants to take me out again. Have I your permission?' And she laughed happily.

'You have my blessing,' said Higgins in an avuncular tone of voice.

'I'm so glad. We're late already but I thought I simply must ring you up.' She laughed again and Fanworth laughed with her. Late already, eh? Apparently his clock complex was cured for *all* time!

Higgins, a half smile on his face, re-cradled the instrument 'Cheeky little minx,' he muttered.

Chief Inspector Dryan yawned prodigiously. 'Well, well, so that's that, eh, Higgy. There's one thing about it, though: Quenlock will be dead on time for the nine o'clock walk when the time comes.'

Dead on time. The phrase seemed so literally and gruesomely appropriate that Inspector Higgins shook his head and shuddered. He is a kindly man at heart.

Chapter Thirty

INGRATITUDE

It cannot be said that Inspector Higgins really enjoyed the journey from Costerley Grange to No. 13, Newton Court, Harlbury, although the car was the latest word in luxury; for Mrs Egmont herself was driving and, as his colleague in charge of the case had warned him, she was certainly a horse-faced, grim old battle-axe.

'You think the cat is my beautiful Babsy, then?' she asked, for perhaps the twentieth time.

'That is for you to say, madam.' Higgins was taking no chances. For all he knew, Anderson, the caretaker of the Hall of the Clear Thinkers, might have lost the brute by now. In fact, he might well deliberately have done so, for he had been warned of the pending visit of the lady from Costerley Grange, and might have taken appropriate evasive action.

Inspector Higgins gave requisite directions; the car traversed the length of Harlbury High Street, then beyond into where it merged into a street of an entirely different name; when it eventually turned into the tiny Newton Court it seemed almost to fill it and caused a minor sensation among the inhabitants.

'Is this the place?' asked Mrs Egmont as she climbed from the car.

'Yes, madam.'

'How singularly unsuitable. Where do we go now?'

'This way, madam.' Higgins pushed open the gate leading to the triangular yard, which looked much neater now the police had gone over it with a fine-tooth comb; then he tapped on that side door and pushed it open.

Anderson, the caretaker, was awaiting them in the hall proper, the coloured windows of which produced such a queer lighting effect. And, queening it on the table on the platform at the end, was the Beauty of Bangkok.

Inspector Higgins had barely time to note that the ~~last~~ Clear Thinkers had had a clear thought at, ~~at~~, and moved the animal's tell-tale collar, when Mrs Egmont leaped across the intervening space, holding out her arms in welcome.

'Babsy, Babsy, my beautiful Babsy,' she said.

The Beauty of Bangkok deigned to turn her head; she objected Mrs Egmont to a brief unwinking blue-eyed basilisk stare of pure indifference and then looked away again.

'W-why! You—you ungrateful beast, you!' Mrs Egmont turned away to glare at the wilting Anderson. 'Does she get her ox-liver regularly?' she demanded.

'W-why, no, mum. She has an occasional 'erring, same as me.'

'And what about cream?'

'She—she likes water, mum.'

Mrs Egmont frowned and looked again at the Beauty of Bangkok. 'H'm! She doesn't look so bad on it,' she observed, nodding her head in self-agreement and satisfaction.

'Oh! I looks arter her all right, mum,' and Anderson's face lit up with pleasure.

'H'm! Didn't you know there was a large reward out for her, my man?'

'No, mum. I can't read. And she's *my* cat, anyway.'

Mrs Egmont turned again to stare at the little man—an extraordinary expression on her face. There was a long silence as he fidgeted with the muffler round his neck. Then he coughed and scratched his head. 'Look here, mum. I could sorta say something like. I mean that I don't want you to sorta think . . .'

'You mean without prejudice, I take it?' suggested Mrs Egmont, imperiously.

Anderson looked uncertainly at Inspector Higgins who nodded—and the man turned once more to Mrs Egmont. 'Well, mum. Look here. Can we call it square if—if I give you ten bob . . . and no questions asked.'

'Ten shillings?' Mrs Egmont's voice rose almost to a screech. 'Ten shillings? Is that all you think the Beauty of Bangkok's worth?'

Anderson ran a grubby hand round the neck-band of his

shirt and scrubbed. 'Well, no, mum. Not exactly. E. but, you see, ~~ten~~ . . . ten bob is—is all I've got.'

Mrs Egmont just stood and stared; she was as near ~~q~~ founded as she was ever likely to be. She made several starts, then: 'You are very fond of cats, I take it,' she said last, in a much quieter tone of voice.

Why, yes'm. And they sorta likes me, too.'

'Right. Tomorrow I'll be along with a van and we pick up your bits and pieces—and your cat—and you can come and live in the country with me and look after all relations for me. Would you like that?'

'*Would I, mum!*' Anderson stood starry-eyed and blind

to the fact. Here's a pound note. Get some ox-liver

